Abstract:
This article presents a project completed by indigenous children through a new methodological proposal that is evocative rather than directive. Children from three different locations (two Náhuatl speaking communities and children of migrants living in the city of Puebla) got to know each other by means of an inter-indigenous dialogue in which the participants explained their worlds, with the use of various visual and verbal communicative technologies. Their materials were consolidated in “texts” that the children organized from beginning to end. The completed work was submitted to the opinions of: 1) the authors, 2) children from the same school, and 3) new friends from the selected locations. In this manner an intercultural dialogue was started among children having contrasting life experiences in spite of similar characteristics in their home communities. The materials allow various readings that concern education as well as educational and visual anthropology, including: the analysis of the most recurring topics that could form part of intercultural curricula; the need to expand the expressive world and not limit it to reading and writing; and the study of how children construct their own world.

Key words: intercultural education, children, reading, writing, curriculum, educational anthropology, Mexico.

Introduction
Years of fieldwork in sociolinguistics and educational sociolinguistics have allowed me to recognize a crude educational reality, with resulting substandard levels of learning and discouragement (from authorities, parents and teachers), in terms of educational plans and programs. If an indigenous child, monolingual in his indigenous language, does not learn to read and write until the fourth grade (Podestá, 2000), this investment in time reduces his possibility to practice, since only two years of basic education remain. Most indigenous students conclude their education after sixth grade, and those who continue on to secondary school do so with great disadvantages. But each sociocultural context has different problems. Children who reside in their communities have the fortune of living in their native location and sharing two cultures: the local and the national; but those who migrate to the city “lose” their culture to adapt to a new location, where the national language rules and multiple indigenous languages “seem” to lose their identity in a global situation.

The national directorship of indigenous education (Dirección General de Educación Indígena—DGEI) is accepting new challenges of professionalization and differentiated curriculum in order to serve indigenous children inside and outside their territories of origin. Teachers must be trained to detect students’ linguistic profiles, degree of bilingualism, the community’s loss of the indigenous language if applicable and the time of that loss, and attitudes towards the indigenous language. We must not forget that the loss of a language does not mean the immediate loss of the related culture. Many social representations characteristic of American Indian cultures survive. Schools must pay attention not only to the language, but also to the culture that
reflects, sustains and embodies that language. If a language is absent, we must still
work with the interculturality of which we are a part. Migrant children of an indigenous
origin who no longer speak the language of their native community can represent the
indigenous world as well as the national sphere in which they are living. As a result,
the challenges of intercultural education are increasingly more complex; to be at the
vanguard, intervening projects must be implemented to provide the necessary
information. But if tenacious individuals exist, indigenous children are foremost on the
list; the problem is how to address their situations.

Research in areas such as educational anthropology, sociolinguistics and applied
linguistics in indigenous languages (Podestá y Martínez, 2003) is insufficient to
comprehend the complex multicultural reality of which we are a part. Such data have
recently been documented in states of knowledge for education, social rights and
equality (Bertely, 2003).

Faced by this sort of challenges and with the help of a small research team, in 1994
I started a project that has been modified and perfected during the past decade. I was
concerned fundamentally by two aspects: What should be done so that indigenous
children write in Spanish and/or in their native language? And, what would they be
interested in telling, in order for them to write with pleasure? The pleasure of writing
would have to be inculcated in some manner, since oral culture predominates in the
indigenous communities.

Similar educational concerns have motivated me to study other topics, which have
been included in an extensive research project (unfinished); this article will outline only
the methodological proposal. The study began in two Nahua communities (Podestá,
1997, 2002b): Santa María Magdalena Yancuitlalpan (municipality of Tochimilco) and
San Miguel Eloxochitlán (district of Tehuacán); at a later date, I added children who
live in the city of Puebla (Podestá, 2000) (Loma Bella neighborhood) as migrants from
various parts of the state. The resulting spatial and linguistic contrast has generated
many possibilities for knowledge.

Our methodological strategy permitted us to talk to children at these locations and
broaden our horizons to new ethnic groups, based on the viewpoint and actions of the
natives themselves; interculturality was constructed through empirical work. Below we
shall address different points that are an indispensable part of the foundation of today’s
reality: a collection authored by indigenous children, who named the first volume
*Nuestros pueblos de hoy y siempre* (“Our Communities Today and Always”) (Niñas,
niños nahuas y Podestá, 2002).

The spatial contrast (country/city).
A reason to feel the difference.
For the children to become fully involved in the project, they had to be given a real
scenario. They had to be introduced to their interlocutors to activate the chain of
communication, but where should these other children live and who should they be?
Such questions led to the selection of two Nahua communities in the state of Puebla, from a different geographical region and with contrasting sociolinguistic conditions. The first community shows high vitality in the indigenous language: San Miguel Eloxochitlán, deep in the Sierra Negra de Puebla, in the district of Tehuacán, where more than one-half of the population is monolingual in the Náhuatl language, including the children— who have recently been put in touch with “civilization” through electricity and the highway. Few have seen television or have left their immediate surroundings; they have never been to a city. The second community is located on the foothills of the Popocatépetl volcano in the Atlixco district: Santa María Magdalena Yancuitlalpan,
where the children are the first generation to have learned Spanish as their first language, and Náhuatl as the second. A large part of the population has immigrated, especially to New York, and the community has ancient customs such as huehuetlahtolli (and old word), the basis of Náhuatl moral philosophy (Muñoz y Podestá, 1994).

Map of the State of Puebla

Although their linguistic domains differ, the children from both communities share the Náhuatl language and live in their territory of origin. The residents of Santa María Magdalena Yancuitlalpan, in contrast with those from San Miguel Eloxochitlán, are linked to the city of Atlixco through their commercial activities, and to the United States through their relatives. In an attempt to represent the state’s diversity even more, a third group of children was included, from a school in the Loma Bella neighborhood on the outskirts of the city of Puebla. The children who attend this school are from migrant families, mostly Nahuas from various regions of the state, and represent the first generation born in the city.

One of the main reasons for working with children from diverse situations is to contrast distinct sociolinguistic forms with individuals from different schools who are rooted to the Náhuatl culture in varying degrees. Eloxochitlán has a bilingual system, while Yancuitlalpan is a federal rural school, and the city school is a federal school that meets in the afternoon.

Although Nahua is the shared element of the three selected contexts, we must not forget that the contemporary segmentation also derives from different colonial historical processes that have influenced the sectorial configuration of a single ethnolinguistic group. We cannot propose a generic Náhuatl type since it would depend on the historical process of identification at the micro-regional level (Bartolomé, 1997:60). Students’ views may allow us to realize that although there are no standard forms of being Nahua, the children are in fact recipients of common cultural and linguistic traditions (Bartolomé, 1997:59).

This range of origins manifests contrasting sociolinguistic processes, from great vitality (Husband y Saifullah, 1982) in the Náhuatl language as in San Miguel Eloxochitlán (where residents use Náhuatl for all their activities), to the displacement of the same language in Santa María Magdalena Yancuitlalpan, where interactions with infants are in Spanish. Although the first language of future generations in the community is Spanish, it is not true that they will not be able to learn Náhuatl. Six-year-olds who enroll in school are passive bilingual beginners in Náhuatl; i.e., they understand but do not speak the language. As teenagers they are able to speak Náhuatl with ease.

The selection of the city school in Loma Bella allows us to approach another linguistic process: the extinction of the indigenous language among children and life in a new territory that has contrasting lifestyles. Will a failure to speak the indigenous language result in displacement of indigenous customs and beliefs? How do indigenous parents socialize their children now living in the city? How do these city children view their relatives’ communities and the city? In the writings of Miguel
Bartolomé (1997, 1996), the displacement processes we have illustrated would match what he refers to as cultural transfiguration.

A teacher and/or researcher does not ask, but only detonates. As researchers in the social sciences, we are accustomed to asking. Questions reveal and also define our interests. Teachers pose questions and provide their own answers, although most do not think about feedback. This is a practice we must modify quickly to enrich inter-learning, a role that must be assumed by any new school—a role open to understanding the differences of countries like Mexico. Complexity is found in diversity, as well as the wealth of what we are today. There is an imperative need for changed attitudes, already evident in social movements and the law. To learn about and respect communities, their customs and knowledge is an unheard call that deserves attention. This implies new forms of doing research: new researcher attitudes and an urgent leading role for the indigenous in educational research projects; the sharing of responsibilities, cultures and differences.

How should these concerns be managed empirically to allow us to get to know each other? A central issue becomes evident: If the children we work with have cultures different from ours (occidental), how can we discover the questionstheir own questionsthat will lead them to develop a typology of the possible topics of their socialization. We know little about the children’s interests, and even less about their cultural knowledge. Exploring this topic would contribute to one of the vertebral areas of indigenous education: intercultural curricula, yet unresolved.

To discover the knowledge of others, we must allow them to act—the principle of the methodological proposal we have implemented. New forms of doing research are implied, and the required levels are two: 1) the horizontal researcher/native exchange, and 2) the native/native exchange.

Based on this second dialogue, we resolved the first part of our thesis by putting one community in contact with the other. Thus we gradually forged an inter-indigenous dialogue among the children from the city and those from the small communities. The second problem was how to motivate the children, and with which topics. It had to be a real communicative situation, a fundamental sociolinguistic principle for communication: another person who hears me, sees me or reads me. The task that united the children was: “Tell your new friend about your community and about yourself, so that he can tell you about his community and about himself.” The assignment allowed the children to situate themselves in their time, space and culture. Two very important references are included in this premise, which indigenous education has left on the margin: the community and the children themselves.

The idea of using an assignment had its origins in a previous educational research project that showed that indigenous children were reading and learning only from national contents foreign to their culture—contents that they were expected to use to express themselves. This fact, among others, is a serious disadvantage provoked by the educational system, whose materials have been designed for city children monolingual in Spanish. Therefore, by basing the assignment on the children’s communities, we would not only discover the contents they emphasize in their culture, but we would also facilitate their expression: children are experts in their own culture, in which they have been socialized. They would always find something to tell, to say—objective and subjective perspectives of the places they were born. And they would explain their communities to children from other locations, not to me. The assignment included a commitment to other children of their same age.
For this reason, we established a series of registers (verbal and nonverbal) through which the native/author would express himself. We included different technologies—writing, speaking, photography, videos and drawings—so be referred to below. Such a range of possibilities allows children in transition from oral to written culture (Monte, 1996), like the children in our study, to start a dialogue on many paths, and reveals their favorite and most ideal options.

The groups’ teachers were invited to participate, but most of them preferred to “loan us” their students so that they could carry out other activities. The children, the authors of their work.

In the established dialogue, the child’s leading role is central for building the methodological proposal. By describing their community—“el más bonito” (“the prettiest”) in their own words—the children make their social representations. While exploring identity, we revealed a basic process of identification: Who am I in the presence of others, in different cultural contexts? How was this authorship achieved? For what purposes?

In the past, I have carried out research projects to address topics of community (Muñoz y Podestá, 1994) and educational sociolinguistics (Podestá, 2000). My most recent project was related to the scholastic achievement of Nahua children in the first grade. These projects have allowed the children to meet me, to know what I do and to form an opinion about me. At the community schools, all the children, regardless of their grade, are aware of events that occur in the institution; therefore, if our attitudes and personalities have been accepted in the past, doors are opened, but if not, obstacles exist. In this new project, the children’s familiarity with me and my attitudes toward them offered me a new space of interaction: I modified my form of working since the children would present their own communities to each other, and would not establish a direct dialogue with me.

The challenge was how to occupy the ritual space of the school for the children to develop, talk about and draw their worlds, what they have learned from their grandparents and families, what they believe and do not believe in, etc. The work begins but does not finish at school; it takes shape when the children bring the knowledge and teaching from their communities to school. We share a space, but mentally and emotionally, the children recreate their community.

When the fifth-graders were offered the possibility of being the protagonists in a project, they accepted with pleasure. Most were very interested and I believe they were captivated by the use of cameras, video cameras and painting. At the beginning, we saw no negatives but over time, some—a minority—did not want to write or participate by speaking; however, they were not pressured or sanctioned. We continued ahead with those who were dedicated and enthusiastic. Truthfully, all the children wanted to paint, film and photograph and were eager to express themselves in this way. Working with children is not easy, especially when a complete group participates.

From the beginning, it was important for the children to include their name and age, but at times they neglected to do so. They were often reminded that the project could not be completed without their free, determined participation, since they were the authors and driving force. They were to explain their town to children from another Náhuatl community and from the city. No one could better speak about their birthplace. In that sense, I attempted to make the children understand that I could not do the project on my own, without their eyes, ears and feelings, and although I could speak about their communities, it would not be as if I had been born there, as a native. When they asked me for suggestions on what to tell (a rooted school habit that points to the
teacher as the sacred voice and “guide”, although the idea was to impress on them that no one knew what to say better than they did), I would repeat that I had not been born there, and that what they wanted to say was their decision. The children had the freedom to tell and organize. It was logical that the idea would mature and develop as they got to know their interlocutors and proved that they were genuine. That would give the children a new dimension.

A second aspect that put the children on another frequency was that they were not to tell me about their communities; rather, their new friends were to be the recipients of their writings, drawings and photographs. These instructions were clear, as we can see in their letters:

Dear Friend: I want to ask you what the city is like (Angélica García Pinzón, 6th grade, 11 years old, MY).

[...] I want to know about your town, what you do there (Manuel Arturo, 6th grade, MY).

[...] we want you to answer us (Alma Roldán Amaro, 10 years old, SM).

[...] I would like you to tell me something more about the country (Marcela García López, 5th grade, 11 years old, c).

All the expressions manifest a plural subject of which I was not a part.¹¹

How does the dialogue begin? What technologies are used?

We initially established the dialogue between the Nahua children of San Miguel Eloxochitlán and Santa María Magdalena Yancuitlalpan. Then we incorporated children from the city of Puebla, children of migrant parents originally from various Nahua zones. The immediate reference for each activity was the other child from the new place. The children did not generally write to anyone in particular but addressed the letter in a generic manner: compañero (“comrade”, “companion”), amiga, (“female friend”) niño or niña; (“boy” or “girl”), yet some directed the correspondence by adding the name of the addressee.

How did we open the dialogue? With letters. The initial assignment was to talk about their community and about themselves in order to introduce themselves to their new friends.¹² They were free to select Náhuatl or Spanish (the case of the Nahua communities) as desired. Spanish was the preferred language, even among children who had started school as monolingual in Náhuatl; in other texts, bilingual versions were utilized. Writing in the indigenous language adhered to no particular alphabet. We must remember that although the children may be in bilingual schools, they do not write in the indigenous language. The first contact by letter shows us, in addition to levels of linguistic mastery, the different thematic aspects to consider:

Curiosity about others:

Girl: I am sending you an answer although I do not know you, I am sending you a letter so that you can know about my town... (Irma, 5th grade, 10 years old, SM).¹³

I want to meet you (Angélica Martínez Díaz, MY).

We will know more about your town although only through letters, which identify us although in writing... (Hortencia Flores Aguilar, MY).

For you to know me and me to know you, and I hope we get along... (Isabel Tapia Matamoros, MY).
Friend, I'd like to know what you look like, I hope you come to visit me and I'd like to know your traditions... (Beatriz Hernández, 10 years old, c).

They continue by listing the topics that involve their town: its topography, flora and fauna, fiestas, services, jobs.

[...] My town is very pretty, it has a lot of trees hills canyons it has a well a church the scenery is very beautiful the town has a telephone a public school flat places in the town there are a lot of plants animals, trees vegetables (Juan Martínez Torres, my).

I want to say. What my community is like, oh my community there are animals animals, those that eat corn, my community there are big cedars there are farm workers that work in the cornfield every day, oh, fruits, mangos, oranges, bananas Peaches, guava and avocados, etc... (Pedro Galvez Salazar, 5th grade, 10 years old, sm).

[...] the city is pretty it's big there are museums supermarkets schools highways cars lots of games hotels houses restaurants churches there are many things... (Hugo Carmona, 10 years old, c).

The questions start immediately: What is your town like? What are you like? In short, everything that attracts the children's interest.

[...] I want to know what your town is like and what your traditions are how you play and what you play with what the volcano is like what work do you do in your town (Hugo Carmona, 5th grade, 10 years old, c).

[...] I would also like to know if you speak languages we don't know like English, Totonaco, etc... (Marcela García López, 5th grade, 11 years old, c).

[...] I want you to tell me about your town I'll be happy if you tell me about the church the fields what you eat etc. and how you are doing thank you very much from your friend (Flora Canalizo Flores, 12 years old, my).

[...] we want to know what the city is like how you dress and what you eat after school and the food you make and the fiestas there in the city and what games and if there is a volcano we also want to know if you use shoes or sandals and what your houses are like and I want to know where your parents work in the country or in a restaurant.... (Angélica Matamoros Flores, 5th grade, 11 years old, my).

In addition to expressing themselves and making reflections, the children prove the veracity of the chain of communication in which they are involved. Others exist and may resemble me or not resemble me.

You are very far but we can communicate through letters and videos. Maybe we'll meet it's an impossible dream but I'll remember you... (Hortensia Flores Aguilar, my).

[...] you can't come because it's very far (Alondra Sitlali, 11 years old, sm).

[...] I'd like you to tell me a little about your traditions and how you live and if you have a good time (Rocío Rodríguez, 10 years old, 5th grade, c).

Once the first phase of communication had been established, we entered the second. The central themes expressed in the children’s letters were studied in various manners by using the previously mentioned diversity of registers (individual and collective drawings, photographs, films and recordings).
Among these elements we find the basic aspects of the community: its neighborhoods, church, ravines, countryside, fields, fiestas, legends, geographical landmarks, like the Popocatépetl volcano or the hills that are constant elements for the children from the chosen locations. In the city are the parks, businesses, automobiles, hotels, hospitals and factories that characterize the space where the children live most of the time. However, when the city children describe the spaces of their grandparents, they express the same topics as the children from the country. They are bicultural in the sense of sharing (without having been born there) the region of their ancestors and the city. Since the city children's trips to their ancestral homes are very frequent, sometimes every weekend, they emphasize ethnic and linguistic awareness in their texts and conversations, a result of their own and their families' experiences.

Why put books together to introduce the children's communities? The challenge consisted of presenting all the expressions the children were able to say, write, photograph and film about their communities. A construction was to be made from the questions raised in the first exchange of letters, a construction not possible with isolated drawings, descriptions or photos. The children suggested the idea of putting together “books” because they had not seen manuscripts about communities and were willing to create them. In this manner we would attain our purpose of working on authorship, not only for the children to sign, but also to permit the formation “native texts” without fragmentation. Most of the indigenous documents prepared by anthropologists show parts of their thinking that are constructed and organized from the outside; the books from the general directorship of indigenous education (Dirección General de Educación Indígena) have sentences and texts written by a teacher, but not global topics. Therefore, we had an excellent opportunity to talk about books. Books in plural because the photos permitted talking about communities while the drawings organized global units with meanings based on local knowledge. The result would be a type of “open books” that would always be supplemented by the children, by schoolmates in other classrooms or by following classes. There was room for known as well as new aspects adopted by their community.

Having children participate in the project and contribute their knowledge implies a commitment that the children assume gradually in their actions. In one of her letters, Enriqueta Flores Alonso, 13 years old and in the fifth grade in Magdalena, wrote about “the drawings that we do because we are interested and we care we do the drawings in our country, if we can do our community”. When the children see color photocopies of her work or scanned and typed copies (in a presentation I prepare from the children's originals, in order for them to continue revising and adding text), I see new commitment in their faces—stonishment about what they have done, pride, emotion and satisfaction. In a short time they assume their roles and discover their worlds: “we did this book so that the people of Yancuitlapan realize everything there is in our town”, comments Guillermina Morales Martinez, 13 years old and from Yancuitlapan.

This encounter with their realities awakens in the children a cultural appreciation of their social representations. It implies reflecting on who they are. Without the children's actions and responses, their work would be detained. In addition, all the texts—individual and collective—are signed by the children. Authorship encourages greater responsibility in the children’s work, especially if they know they have the possibility of making books with their materials. This opportunity provides them all with enthusiasm. If another child is going to read or look at my texts, I shall try two things: first, to show and explain information to the maximum because he is not familiar with
me; and second, to make an effort to give everything of myself I can. In this manner, we are creating a chain of authors that takes us to represent group thinking and glimpse this inherited collective memory; I belong to a place and I represent a group.

In some schools, as in Yancuitlalpan, we begin in fourth grade in order to provide follow-up and be able to work on the results with children in the fifth or sixth grades. Julia Aspiros Mondragón, 11 years old and in the 6th grade at Yancuitlalpan, describes this process in her own words:

The legends were put in books because grandparents told them to their children or grandchildren, then they told them at school when I was in the fourth grade some young people came so that we could make a book about the town when I passed to fifth grade they worked with us again and when I passed to sixth grade they gave us some cameras and radios for us to record stories and legends and also to take photos and then the book appeared and that is how the book was made.

Verification by the various age groups is ongoing, in order to compare points of view, values and beliefs regarding the topics addressed. In this manner, cousins and brothers and sisters from different classes can see how the materials are assembled. The idea is to construct and reconstruct by adding to and reflecting on that first building block. Children’s “spontaneity” and relaxed replies allow us to study certain topics with greater ease, as we do not do with adults.

The different topics expressed are individual and collective work that will be organized and planned through group consensus.

Once “finished” and ordered in their most polished version, the children gave the work to friends in other classrooms, and then to their new friends. This is a long process of elaboration, meditation, and the pronouncement of opinions by the authors and then by the children from the same town. It is fundamental for the researcher and/or teacher to accompany the process.

This book is about my community.

What do friends from other classrooms think?

The ordered texts, finalized by the authors, represent their communities and their essence. In the results, we perceive that the adopted structures are not school structures, but are internalized in the children's socialization. We have organized “books” based on the photography, and other books where drawings are central. However, in both cases the writing reinforces the images through description, and at the same time, offers us the interpretation of the author himself.

The children were able to perfect the work in different stages. Before sending the texts to their new friends, the authors reviewed the details, and other groups from the same school expressed their opinions. With this reading we built a chain of inside readers having the moral and ethical capacity of the culture(s) they share, and who were able to list with confidence any missing elements, corroborate expressions and question the project’s organization before it left their own town.

In my experience, criticism within a group is seen when a topic is dealt with plainly or has not been emphasized sufficiently: Teresa Morales (6th grade, 12 years old) states: “I liked the book a lot because it has narratives that our classmates wrote... Some I didn’t like because they repeated words all the time...”. As we saw, the children's comments not only referred to the content and form of the text, but also to the evaluation (of the known and learned). The children have total freedom to reformulate, substitute or create; generally the author does so if he believes it pertinent and has the knowledge; sometimes other classmates offer their help. Such
agreements are among the children exclusively and do not cause ill feelings. Great solidarity and unanimity exist because the children are the authors and they are speaking about their community.

Once the forms are rectified or ratified, the topics and the order allude to the project as a whole, to the process followed, to the assigned importance, to the richness of the interactive work with other children from other spaces, and to the learning involved. The opinions expressed by the young authors of Magdalena Yancuitlalpan imply different levels:

Collective work and plural authorship:

[... this book was made by the children of this school (Teresa Morales Canalizo, 12 years old).]

[... it was prepared by a group of students in which we all participated by making drawings, texts, legends stories also with photographs (Miguel González Flores, 12 years old).]

This book was made by us (Alberto Flores Martínez).

[...] this book was made by all the children because they drew they wrote... (Gregoria Francisca González Vega, 12 years old).

The cognitive contributions involved. The contrast permitted by the interaction between communities:

We made this book so that other children from other towns could know about the customs, the languages spoken and what the fiestas are like (Moisés Aguilar Matamoros, 6th grade).

[... it’s very pretty we realized that they work it has what they work with (Hipólito Hernández, 12 years old).

[...] that some towns are different from ours because of the clothes, the houses... (Wilhelm Hernández García, 11 years old, 5th grade).

By presenting their communities, the children also learn about themselves, recognize themselves and share knowledge among generations:

[... we made this book so that the people of Yancuitlapan know about everything there is in our town (Guillermina Morales Martínez, 13 years old).

[...] I also learned that it is important that they ask people who are sort of old because old people always know more than to be envious and we must not be envious (Araceli M. D., 11 years old).

Working with different ethnolinguistic contexts offers children linguistic self-reflection:

[...] I liked writing because it was very easy and I would like for the meanings to be put in Náhuatl and if they scold us because we are Mexicans we should learn more Náhuatl (Leovigildo).

By passing the text to classmates from the same school, their contributions enrich the text:

I would like to put more things in the Book like photos of the canyons, bridges, witches, animals, like the deer wildcats bats and other animals and also other things that we could research in the whole town... (Sergio Moranchel Flores, 6th grade).
I would have liked it a lot if my classmates from this school had also written a lot about what there is in nature which is the most important thing this town can have... (Silvia Matamoros Flores, 6th grade).

I would like to expand the part about the Forests and expand the part about the animals that are already becoming extinct... (Ernesto García Aguilar, 12 years old, 6th grade).

The children also mention what they like:

[...] what I like most is the spring because we drink the water it shouldn't be made dirty... (Eugenia Flores Alonso, 6th grade).

What I like most is the spring because the water there is fresh and crystalline we use that water for everything that spring is pretty everything in the country and the spring is a work of nature... (Macrina Martínez García, 6th).

The children point out what they do not like and what is missing:

[...] I wanted more questions in the book I liked it but not much what I liked was the large pond downtown because there is water that comes from the spring...

[...] I do not like the photographs of the streets because they did not take them from the other side you can't tell what they are.

As witnesses of their classmates' work, the children explain their liking of the project and the origin of the material:

[...] it seemed very nice to us because we didn't have a book like this one a year ago they wrote about our town and put in some photographs that they took.

In addition to collecting the children's opinions, we incorporated the parents of Magdalena. Their children had shared the project at home and received their parents' help:

[...] it's good because it is going to be used for the children who don't know and they should know what towns are like, how people are managed in towns, I think it is indispensable, I don't deny it, it is good.

In their multiple expressions, they construct and discuss the social representations of their community. In each activity, the central topics, interests, likes and preferences are reiterated, as if they flowed into the same stream.19

What do the new friends say about the formulated book?

After the children of the same community had “approved” the project, I took it to other locations. The opinions, discrepancies, suggestions and criticism (sometimes quite direct) of the outside readers are written and sent to the authors, who consider them for the following version. Many of the complaints are expressed between the city and country children, and not between the towns. The city children, as children of migrants, are also familiar with the towns. The children from Yancuitlalpan have had experiences related to international immigration, and therefore require more information than that provided by their friends.
When the city children read the texts by the children from Yancuitlalpan, they mark their differences from other books and comment that “the normal books talk about only one thing, this one has a lot of photos, drawings, many titles” and refer to the book’s content: “sometimes the books talk about real things and some books talk about make-believe things... this book does not talk about fantasy, only reality.” They continue by saying that “the book is fun and easy to read, very pretty, they tell us about their things, they have a lot of imagination and you see that in their drawings, their way of thinking.”

The city children make reference to the plural authorship that contrasts with the other books: “it has a lot of authors.” Other comments have to do with the contribution that the text makes or fails to make:

[..] I think the project is very good but the gardens, the canyons, the houses, etc. I am already familiar with all that and I advise them to put in other things that we don’t know about.

The truth is that I don’t know what else they’re going to put in but they should put in unusual things and that way we can get to know them. I hope that they do it and their work is very good. (Adriana Jiménez López, 11 years old, 6th grade, c).

I would like to know why there are streets the same as the ones here, there is also a street called “16 de Septiembre” here. Because we are already familiar with almost everything because many of us have gone to the towns I would like you to send us photos of yourself like we did /SINCERELY (Sandra, 11 years old, 6th grade, c).

In both cases the city children reveal their identity, their knowledge of the towns “we are already familiar with almost everything because many of us have gone to the towns.” The children from Magdalena Yancuitlalpan talk about the book from the city:

Hi friends
I understood that what I put in was already known well some I don’t know what buildings are like I don’t know about them because they are in the city and since I’m not from the city I don’t know the buildings I want to tell you friends that television stereo and recorders I know about everything you put only the buildings I didn’t know the “calle de la sirena” street neither did I know the kindergarten I know about the cooperative I didn’t know the church or what it is made of I know about cars and I am going to tell you that I know about books bridges and I also want to tell you that what you put as known and unknown is wrong because what you put as unknown we know all about it I know about it well I have told you what I don’t know about and thank you for showing us the photos from there (Martha G. E., 11 years old, 6th grade).

In Conclusion
The process of reading about one’s self, knowing one’s self, and working as a harmonious team in the community has taught me several things in methodological terms: the importance of group work in the social sciences, through which we can see children’s joint construction of their surroundings; the observable identity processes the children describe and their respective movement; the various manners of self-reflection, self-description and self-conception with regard to others; and the empirical approach to the study of identities. Our indigenous children are unfamiliar with the ethnic conformation of their region, and even less so with that of their state or nation.

In this proposal, writing acquires a different sense than that marked by schools; it involves communicating pleasantly about something the children love—heir
community. In addition, signing a text as its author emphasizes the appropriation of writing. With this strategy, the graphically centered nature of the school system opens up to other languages to express significant aspects of the children's cultures. Thus we are able to study other, insufficiently explored angles in which the native child author gives his own explanation of the facts. In this sense, one of the contributions is the need to explore self-references.

In terms of speaking, we can observe the children's excellent memory skills, which schools do not recognize or execute. Such an observation makes us rethink the discussion between oral and written societies. The possibility of enjoying the children's activities as a researcher; of liberating their creativity, of granting them a space to talk about who they are, what interests them, what they believe in, how they live, etc., through questions they and I formulate; of showing by means of multiple projects that indigenous children are not timid, apathetic or disinterested, nor do they deserve many of the other negative labels placed on them by schools. We need to think urgently about the reorientation of indigenous schools, to include their cultures and the training of sensitive, prepared teachers who are able to work with students with dignity.

Notes

1. Taken from the paradigm of social representations of the French school of social psychology begun by Serge Moscovici. This author defines such representations as the product and processes of mental activity through which an individual or group reconstitutes what is real and attributes a specific meaning to it (Moscovici, 1961). It is a form of knowledge that is socially elaborated and shared with a practical objective that coincides with the construction of a common reality for a social group (Jodelet, 1989).

2. I acknowledge the valuable participation of Clara Chilaca, Elizabeth Martínez, Ricardo Xochitemol, Rosalba Huerta, Angélica Momox and Jiasu Pacheco.


4. And in the Otomi village of San Pablito, in the municipality of Pahuatlán, state of Puebla, so that children can observe the differences and similarities of indigenous peoples.

5. We worked with the final two grades of elementary school, 5th and 6th, and with the 1st year of secondary school in San Miguel Elxochitlán. Ages ranged from 10 to 13 in elementary school, and some in secondary school, although a minority, were from 15 to 17.

6. Puebla was chosen because it is the state with the fourth largest potential demand for indigenous education (Oaxaca, Chiapas, Veracruz, Puebla, Guerrero, Yucatán, Hidalgo and San Luis Potosí) in Mexico (Ahuja, 2001:5). These states concentrate 84.5% of total demand, a reality assumed statistically but not in daily life. The total population of the state of Puebla is 4,713,802 inhabitants (INEGI, 2000), and the indigenous population is 11.7%. Within the indigenous population, 33% are school-age children: approximately 182,000. In addition, Puebla is in fifth place in terms of major socioeconomic advantages (SEP-DGEL, 1999). We are aware, however, that our nation's statistics do not know how many Indians now live in Mexico.

7. Most of the children enroll in monolingual schools in the Náhuatl language; in the third or fourth grade, they learn to write (Podestá, 2000).

8. If we analyze the data of García, Chilaca and Pérez, 1998, we see that the levels of preference for the Náhuatl language are high (43.5%); however only 31.4% of this total have taught their children Náhuatl as a first language. 21.7% prefer Spanish, but 58.8% have taught it as a first language. All of these postures define the linguistic attitudes of future generations (Muñoz, 1990).

9. Many authors prefer not to study identity processes in children because they argue that children undergo processes through which their postures vary. Emphasis should be placed on the work of Mary E. Goodman on the "racial conscience" of children, which reaches the surprising conclusion that children from age four can show unmistakable signs of racial intolerance: signs that can form part of ethnic identity from a young age (Cardoso de Oliveira, 1992).

10. The first phase of this project was possible thanks to the financing of SEP-CONACYT, followed by the cooperation of various institutions, including El Colegio de Puebla AC, Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades de la Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa and Secretaría de Educación Pública del estado de Puebla.

11. Emphasized by the author. The relationship established among the children is clearly indicated. From this point on, all of the children's writing is reproduced textually.

12. Letters are a fitting form of discourse to establish relationships with strangers. Letters trigger the chain and permit the children to describe who they are, while giving them the opportunity to ask questions about the unknown.

13. The codes correspond to: SM (San Miguel), MV (Magdalena Yancuitlalpan) and C (City).
The children from the Fundadores city school describe the countryside where their parents were born: “The country is nice, big with bits of paradise, like lots of trees, where you can live peacefully.” “I like the country because you can spread out a lot. It’s bigger than the city.” “I want to go to the country. I want to smell the plants and I want to see the animals.” “My mother wants to go to the country, and she would like it the same as my father.”

They know, however, the fears of those who have arrived in the city for the first time, like many of their relatives. Through them, they have experienced such fears. The selected quote of Marcela García López illustrates this point.

The selected city children know more about the country than the country children know about the city. For example, children in the country work hard by loading, chopping weeds, carrying water, planting, etc.

The field of indigenous education has a great need for its own materials to encourage the children to read about and value their cultures.

Emphasized by author.

The students of San Miguel Eloxochitlán and Santa María Magdalena Yancuitlalpan refer to the fundamental geographical symbols of their territory (hills in the first case and the volcano in the second). The country is intermixed with geographical symbols, animals, water and flora. Church and school are the institutions around which their entire life revolves.

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