### **₩** CHAPTER THREE **₩**

# Welcome to Room 307

Inter-American influenced my life in a very good way. When I have kids of my own, I am not going to send them to a regular grammar school. If I can't put them in Inter-American, then I would have to look for another one with a bilingual setting. That is a given.

—Inter-American graduate (Salvadoran female)

A STHE DAY BEGAN, the sounds of English and Spanish swirled and overlapped. Veronica and Alicia lingered in the Reading Corner, where Tupperware bins overflowed with books in both languages. Enrique and César shared a package of Oreos at the Resultados table, while Naomi read them a poem she had written. Other children were coming and going from a small storage area, the "saloncito," as Ms. Sontag handed out paints and poster board. Like other teachers at Inter-American, she was constantly looking for ways to engage her students by encouraging their creative interests.

It was only October, but children's artwork already covered the available wall space, colliding with dinosaur skeletons. Mobiles of geometric shapes, butterflies, and a large paper sun dangled from the ceiling, all crafted by second-grade hands. At the front of the room, a poster headlined "Acciones Valientes" bore the names of Camilo, Amber, and other

children who had performed kind and heroic deeds on the playground or elsewhere. Hanging nearby were rosters listing the four cooperative learning groups: *Procedimiento, Pregunta, Resultados,* and *Hipótesis.*\*

Bilingual lists of synonyms completely filled the rear chalkboard. The words to Gloria Estefan's "Hablemos el Mismo Idioma," printed neatly in block letters, occupied a flip chart. Near the classroom door, a sign read, "If I were in charge of the world ..." Posted below, second-grade compositions described a world free of dentists and vegetables and full of chocolate ice cream and people who succeed in life even though they forget to take baths. The teacher's desk, which she never seemed to use, had been taken over by student science projects.

Student creations also spilled into the hallway, which was starting to look like a children's museum, complete with dioramas of prehistoric times and prehistoric predators. A mural spread across an adjacent wall, covered with the imprints of children's feet, illustrating how scientists answer questions about dinosaurs. Responses by each of the learning groups were strategically placed among the footprints.

"¿Cuál dinosaurio corre y cuál camina?" Which dinosaur runs and which walks? The Procedimientos had answered: "Los científicos saben que un dinosaurio corre porque hay más distancia entre las piernas del dinosaurio que cuando caminan." Scientists know that a dinosaur runs because there is more distance between their legs than when they walk.

Meanwhile, in the main classroom, more art was in production. Student-made big books traveled back and forth between tables. Manny and Amber were painting a poster for the school-wide potluck dinner next week. Dylan worked on the bill of his cap, making designs with a magic marker.

This was the scene in Room 307 when a mysterious visitor arrived.

"Ugggggh!" Veronica shrieked, jumping up from her chair in the Reading Corner. "Lookit, lookit!" Backing away, she pointed at a small black creature making its way slowly across the rug.

Alicia, who had been rummaging casually through the book bins, was startled as well. Peering from behind Veronica's shoulder, she echoed

<sup>\*</sup>Procedure, Question, Results, and Hypothesis.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>†</sup>We Speak the Same Language.

her friend's sentiment. "Oh, yuck! Gross!"

Soon a cluster of classmates gathered, surrounding the slowly moving object.

"Disgusting!" pronounced Enrique.

"Now our whole room's gonna get disgusting!" Liset wailed.

Amber remained calm. "It's just a bug," she said.

"Yeah, I bet it's a beetle," Manny declared.

"No it's not, it's a water bug," Andy corrected. "I saw one before at my aunt's house, in the basement. They're not poisonous."

"¿Por qué habrá un insecto de agua acá, si no hay agua?" Beatríz was bewildered why there would be a water bug where there was no water. So was Liset. "Is there water leaking in here?" she asked.

From across the room Ms. Sontag observed the commotion and prayed that the intruder was not a cockroach. The dilapidated building should have been replaced many years ago. Cold air crept in through the crevices in the winter, and so did bugs in the fall. But the Board of Education's promise of a new school site never seemed to materialize.

"Hey, I bet if I step on it, it will go cruuuuuunch!" Damion looked at Veronica out of the corner of his eye. But before he could act on his idea, Ms. Sontag arrived.

"Niños, déjenlo en paz," she said. *Leave it in peace, kids.* "Este pobre insecto no ha hecho nada malo a ninguno de ustedes. No es justo." This poor insect hasn't done you any harm. "Además es la hora de almorzar. Vámonos." Besides, it's time for lunch. Let's go.

Her students slowly trickled toward the door, still wondering what kind of insect the ugly blob could be. And Ms. Sontag, always ready to experiment with curriculum, wondered what she might do with the sudden explosion of interest that had just occurred in her classroom.

# Setting the Stage for Discovery

As a practitioner of what she calls "student-centered approaches" her term for constructivism—Ms. Sontag has consciously designed Room 307 with such principles in mind. The physical environment itself facilitates learning, by stimulating children's natural desire to explore and discover for themselves. Walls decorated with secondgraders' creations celebrate their talent and intellect, along with their emerging bilingualism.

The Reading Corner, where children can relax with books in English or Spanish, stresses the importance of literacy. The hallway display with student compositions on dinosaurs emphasizes problem-posing. How and why did scientists come to theorize what we know about dinosaurs? This approach is consistent with constructivist theory, which emphasizes concepts over facts, deep understanding over rote learning, and the transfer of knowledge between disciplines.

Constructivists rely on teaching strategies that inspire further discovery. They believe that active learning is more likely to be internalized, retained, and built upon. That is, it gives memory to what is worthwhile to know and experience.

#### No Tv Week

"¿EN QUE SEMANA ESTAMOS?" Ms. Sontag asked her eighteen rambunctious charges. What week is it?

The children sat on the floor expectantly in two rows, separated by a wide swath of yellow paper running the length of the room. Chairs and desks were pushed toward the north and south walls like useless clutter. Eagerness radiated from eyes, hands, fingers, legs, feet, and torsos. This was not a study in still life.

"Lunes," said Wendell. *Monday*.

"Octubre," volunteered Enrique.

"¿Qué semana?" their teacher persisted. What week?

"Halloween!" offered Naomi.

Almost in a whisper, Alicia responded, "Semana sin televisión."

"Otra vez Alicia," Ms. Sontag said, with an encouraging smile.

This time Alicia's response was loud and confident: "Semana sin televisión."

"Okay." Ms. Sontag affirmed that this was indeed No Tv Week, as agreed upon by the entire school community. With Inter-American

<sup>\*</sup>Once more, Alicia.

parents' approval and support, each student had signed a pledge to turn off the TV set, as well as videos and video games. In this and countless other ways, theirs was hardly a typical public school.

There had been predictable resistance at first. In response, Ms. Sontag read the class a short article discussing how television affects us all making our brains less active, discouraging exercise, even disturbing our sleep. Also, as a homework project, she assigned the children to count acts of violence in the programs and commercials they normally watched. Everyone was shocked by the results. A discussion about the possible harm from watching so much murder and mayhem convinced the remaining doubters. Besides pledging to boycott TV for the upcoming week, the students agreed to keep a diary describing how alternative projects, games, and get-togethers occupied their time.\*

Today's lesson was designed to help them make plans for those activities. "¡Vamos a hacer un mural!" Ms. Sontag announced. We're going to make a mural! Continuing in Spanish, she began to organize the work. "¿Quién quiere dibujar una televisión? Dos personas para dibujar la televisión. ¿Quién queremos? ¿Puedes eligir una persona? ¿Quién queremos?"+

Now entering their third year of the dual immersion program, the children were not yet fully bilingual, although their skills varied significantly. When speaking in their second language, most students still made plenty of mistakes. Yet they were usually able to follow what Ms. Sontag was saying. As a former ESL and family literacy teacher, she knew how to make both Spanish and English input comprehensible to second-language learners, skillfully using physical gestures and context, along with a conversational style that stripped her speech of needless complexity. So today, when she asked for nominations, many hands shot up excitedly.

Joaquin was first to be recognized. He recommended Alicia to assist in drawing the television on the class mural. Andy was called on next.

<sup>\*</sup>They promised it would be an honest record, recording if and when they succumbed to temptation. As it turned out, not many did. In fact, most students reported not missing TV at all; several commented on how much time they had for other activities.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>†</sup>Who wants to draw a television? Two people to draw the television. Whom do we want? Who wants to nominate someone? Whom do we want?

"¿Quién quiere?"\* Ms. Sontag asked. "Yo," he responded. The teacher giggled but accepted his self-nomination.

"¿Quieren elegir a otra persona?" She asked the class for one more candidate.

"José Luis," Leticia suggested.

Following general approval from the class, Ms. Sontag gave instructions to the three designated artists. Continuing in Spanish, she solicited additional volunteers to work on specific parts of the group project, which was intended to highlight alternative things to do in the absence of television. The children responded enthusiastically and bilingually. While English chatter predominated, it didn't entirely muffle the sounds of Spanish. In dual immersion classrooms, lessons take place in one language or the other. But during informal exchanges among students, no formal language policy is enforced.

After repositioning the children to ensure equal coverage of the mural, Ms. Sontag entered the saloncito. As soon as she disappeared around the corner, energetic hands and feet sprang into action. Children leaped over the yellow paper, crawled into and through it, and generally treated it like a pile of autumn leaves.

"C'mon guys, you're messing up. You're messing it up," warned Veronica, ever-concerned about her teacher's approval. "Ms. Sontag is going to get mad at us and she's not going to let us do it." Her words seemed to have little effect on her classmates.

Suddenly, their teacher reappeared with an armload of supplies for painting. "Shhhhhhh... Ya pasó mucho tiempo," she remarked. Much time had passed and the children needed to get to work. But the sight of the art supplies excited them further.

"Niños, no pasaremos nada," Ms. Sontag cautioned. *Children, we won't be passing out anything.* "Si van a jugar, si van a brincar, no les voy a pasar la pintura porque no queremos hacer un desastre." *If you are going to play and jump around, we won't be passing out the paint, because we don't want to create a disaster.* Most of the children calmed down immediately, but a few could not leave the mural paper alone.

"Don't step on it!" Liset cried.

<sup>\*</sup>Whom do you want?

"You're making it dirty!" Beatriz warned.

Several children brought supplies from the saloncito. Soon their eager hands were manipulating paintbrushes, water, and tempera paint.

It was afternoon now, a brilliant autumn day, and the sun was dazzling. The classroom shades were drawn, turning trees into black silhouettes swaying in the wind, as leaves rustled against the windows. Children's voices scattered throughout the room in a turbulent mix of English and Spanish. Again the dominant sounds were English at first, but Ms. Sontag never broke from Spanish. Her students gradually followed suit.

"¡Maestra, maestra! Yo olvidé que ..." Veronica's fractured Spanish was lost in the swirl of noise from her classmates: "¿Cómo ponemos semana sin televisión?" ... "¡Como aquí y allá!"\* ... "Yeah! That's a Tv!" ... "¡Maestra!" ... "I'll make the тv."

The room itself had come alive with color and motion; it seemed that every space was being used in the service of art. Weaving her way through the chaos, Ms. Sontag commented in encouraging tones on the children's work. "¡Qué bueno!" How nice! "¡Qué más tenemos? Leer, jugar, jugar varios juegos. ¿Qué más tenemos?" What else do we want? Reading, playing different games. What else?

Marisol was writing, "Ir a cumpleaños" beneath her drawing. "¡Y los cumpleaños!" her teacher exclaimed, chuckling at the talk of birthday parties. At other points on the mural, Wendell was painting a garden plot, while Leticia illustrated a kitchen scene with cookies baking. Naomi worked on a portrait of herself reading a book. Camilo drew himself flying a kite. A few feet away, Manny and Dylan stood together, painting each other's shirts.

With eighteen dedicated artists at work, the mural itself was nearing completion. Finally, it was cleanup time. "Okay niños, es la hora de limpiar," Ms. Sontag announced, giving her students specific instructions on how to proceed. The teacher's voice was like a sudden gust of wind. Children scurried off the floor carrying paint, paintbrushes, and water into the storage room. When they returned, José Luis and Dylan leaped

<sup>\*</sup>Teacher, teacher! I forgot that ... How do we place No Tv Week? ... Like here and there!

joyously over the mural. Amber and Damion tried to follow but landed in the middle of it, amid freshly painted pictures.

"¡Felicidades!" *Congratulations!* The teacher's rebuke was soft yet firm. The room went silent as children stopped to stare at their two classmates sitting in the middle of the freshly painted mural. Their silence seemed to acknowledge a collective responsibility for the mini-disaster. Ms. Sontag needed to say no more.

In a flash they were assisting her, lifting the yellow paper off the floor and above their heads, like a Chinese dragon. Outstretched arms draped it over Ms. Sontag's desk and a series of tables, where it could dry safely before being moved to decorate the hallway. With the mural set aside, all hands were free to reposition chairs and desks, transforming their space back into a classroom.

Outside, the falling leaves spiraled in the cool, crisp air. Inside, the school felt equally rich and colorful.

## Collaborative Learning

Today the learning environment is shaped by a project-based activity. What, in another time and place, was a teacher's desk has been transformed into a shared resource, a fitting metaphor for this non-traditional classroom. Meanwhile, movable furniture allows for flexibility; the space can be continually redesigned to foster exploration and experimentation. The teacher still has her own domain separated from the communal area, the saloncito, in which she plans and prepares materials that the students will need.

Ms. Sontag's use of the mural to highlight No Tv Week is also instructive. Murals are relational, a connected series of pictorial elements. Images are not randomly drawn by individuals but collectively created. Children are given the freedom to move about and consult with each other about what they are doing—in either language, although the teacher makes it clear that the language of the lesson is Spanish. In that context, *code-switching* between languages is discouraged, except in a few circumstances, such as when a term needs clarification or the teacher is comforting a child.

When Andy nominates himself for a specific task in creating the mural, Ms. Sontag accepts his offer. Avoiding what would be a small humiliation if she turned him down, the teacher adds a third child to the project. Thus the interpersonal environment of this classroom is characterized by individual freedom and respect, combined with collective responsibility. The children's sense of group ownership becomes evident in the disapproval directed at students who disrupt the project.

A space filled with sound and motion that might appear chaotic to an outside observer is, in reality, guided by constructivist principles.

#### Clifford Goes to School

THE NEXT MORNING NAOMI made a beeline for the Reading Corner, her favorite part of the classroom, which Ms. Sontag had set aside to encourage students with free time to read books of their own choosing. Bins of Spanish- and English-language volumes lined the shelves. A beanbag chair and two pieces of rug were tossed on the floor beneath.

Naomi was excited about learning to read in two languages at once, especially since some of her cousins were native speakers of Spanish. Leaning against a beanbag chair, she opened the copy of Clifford y la Tormenta on her lap, carefully studying the pictures. The English version, Clifford and the Big Storm, lay on the floor beside her.

"What book is that?" her friend Marisol inquired, flopping down on the reading rug.

"Shhhhh! Wait!" Naomi didn't look up, as she started to read the Spanish words.

"Let me see," insisted Marisol, who was a stronger reader in Spanish than in English.

"Just wait a minute," Naomi repeated firmly. With Marisol looking over her shoulder, she read silently in Spanish, then turned the page. Furrowing her brow, she gazed for a while at another picture. It featured a vehicle painted with the words "autobús de defensa civil."

Naomi asked what the words meant in English. "It's a bus," Marisol replied matter-of-factly.

"I know that. I want to know what *kind* of bus. I want to *see* that bus. What is it called in English?" Receiving no answer, Naomi picked up the English version and turned to the same page. "Civil defense bus," she announced.

Marisol lost interest and started rummaging through the book bins. She pulled out another bilingual set of Clifford books. After Naomi had finished reading about how the big red dog saved the day during a storm, Marisol showed her *Clifford's First Halloween* and *El Primer Halloween de Clifford*.

"Ohhhhh, let me see that!" Naomi reached for the English version.

"Why don't you, like, read that one to me? And I can read the Spanish one to you," Marisol suggested.

The two girls sat side by side on the reading rug, lounging against the chair. After Marisol read a page of *El Primer Halloween de Clifford* aloud, Naomi would follow with the same page in *Clifford's First Halloween*. Gradually, they made their way to the end, looking intently at the pictures. Soon they were discussing their own costumes for the school's upcoming Halloween parade.

Later that day, after the children had departed, Ms. Sontag gazed in the mirror as she experimented with blacking out one of her teeth. With anticipation, she thought of how the children would react when she came to school on Halloween disguised as a second-grader.

# Literacy in Two Languages

Free voluntary reading,\* a regular feature of this classroom, provides time for children to read solely for pleasure. Here it takes a bilingual turn. Books are available in each language and sometimes in both. Students choose whatever interests them.

Ms. Sontag has selected separate editions of each story—one in English, the other in Spanish—rather than bilingual editions. The latter are popular, featuring either side-by-side English and Spanish or sequential versions in each language. The difficulty with such formats, however, is that children are likely to read in their stronger language and tune out their weaker one. Of course,

<sup>\*</sup>Also known as sustained silent reading.

one copy of a book is usually cheaper than two. But if the idea is to promote second-language acquisition, providing two separate editions allows the teacher maximum flexibility.

Through her choice of two books, Naomi shows her motivation to learn Spanish. She decides to read in her weaker language, using the English text only as a backup to help her understand unfamiliar vocabulary in Spanish. She also scans the pictures carefully, using the visual cues to enhance her comprehension. Finally, at Marisol's urging, Naomi takes advantage of the social context of her classroom to do bilingual partner reading.

None of this has been directly facilitated by the teacher. Rather, through her choice of books and physical arrangement of the classroom, Ms. Sontag serves as a catalyst for free voluntary reading. The result is to bring together a peer group rich in linguistic resources and an environment in which children feel free to relax and explore enjoyable books.

#### A Sailor Went to Sea

Arriving home, Naomi pulled a notebook out of her backpack and eagerly displayed her homework assignment.

Marinero que se fue a la mar, mar, mar, Para ver que podía ver, ver, ver. Y el único que pudo ver, y ver, y ver, Fue el fondo de la mar, mar, mar.\*

Her mother, Rebecca, recognized the words. Though not fluent in Spanish herself, she knew they belonged to a hand-clapping game in English that she had played as a child, called "A Sailor Went to Sea." She smiled, as Naomi practiced the game, accompanied by clapping motions, with an invisible partner.

Turning toward her mom, Naomi announced, "This is how people learn Spanish." She recited the lyrics to the song slowly, using English vowel sounds and her version of a Southern accent. She repeated the

<sup>\*</sup>A sailor went to sea, sea, sea, / To see what he could see, see, see. / And all that he could see, see, see, / Was the bottom of the sea, sea, sea.

song three times, gradually speeding up the tempo. With each rendition her speech was slightly less Anglicized. Finally, she said, "He's learning Spanish more," beginning to sing with native-like pronunciation.

Absorbed in the new game, Naomi asked Rebecca to write down the way this fictitious person sang "Marinero." Repeating it slowly in the English-accented version, she stood over her mother's shoulder and watched her compose the transcript.

"Marimero pe se fue ara mar y mar y mar," Naomi dictated, while Rebecca copied down the words from her daughter's notebook. Naomi frowned but continued: "Para ver fer poria very very air." Again, her mother wrote the correct Spanish: "Para ver que podía ver, ver, ver."

Naomi wrinkled her nose. "Mom, give me your pen, please," she said impatiently. Crossing out "que podía," she substituted "fer poria." After a brief pause, she replaced "ver, ver, ver" with "very very air." Naomi surveyed her work and smiled. Then she went back to the first sentence, changed the *n* in "marinero" to an *m* and "a la" to "ara," and added a *y* after "mar." Giggling, she continued to dictate and then revise the Spanish, line by line, until it was thoroughly Anglicized.

"Read it now, mom," Naomi said. Rebecca imitated her daughter's Southern drawl as she read the final transcription:

Marimero pe se fue ara mary mary mar, Para ver fer poria very very air. Pelo unico kay pudo very very air, Fue-e el fondo de la mark, mark, mark.

The verse ended, punctuated by their laughter.

### Metalinguistic Awareness

In her wordplay, Naomi displays a heightened sensitivity to language—also known as *metalinguistic awareness*—a common trait among bilingual children, who must constantly compare and contrast different linguistic systems. Not yet fully proficient in Spanish herself, she still enjoys imitating, in spoken and written form, a beginning Spanish learner. According to Ms. Sontag and other secondgrade teachers at Inter-American, this behavior was not unusual. The children did not engage in the imitation of English accents with any kind of malicious intent, but rather as a language game—another form of exploring interests outside of school that had been stimulated in the classroom.

## Village Builders

Snow sifted softly down, covering walkways and alleyways behind the school. From the windows of Room 307, children gazed dreamily, adrift in visions of snowmen and snow angels.

"Okay, ¡escuchen bien!" *Listen Up!* Ms. Sontag had to speak especially loud this January morning to get her students' attention. "Atrás están los materiales para el yucayeque." *In the back there are materials for making the village*. She motioned toward multicolored stacks of poster board and construction paper, markers, scissors, tape, glue, pencils, and other assorted supplies. These elements would soon be transformed into a settlement like the ones inhabited by the Taíno people when they first encountered Christopher Columbus.

Making eye contact with the children, now gathered in clusters, Ms. Sontag stressed the importance of working together cooperatively in groups to complete the assignment: "Van a tener que hablar en sus grupos de como van a hacer su parte."

Each group had been given specific responsibilities. For some this meant constructing a *bohio*, or Taíno home; others would create animals or musical instruments used by the Taínos. Enrique, Veronica, and Manny were responsible for both a bohío and the farmland, or *conuco*, laden with major crops of the Caribbean, including yucca, guava, guanábana, and papaya.

The project was part of their school's Curriculum of the Americas, which introduced children to the major cultures that combined to create Latin America: indigenous, Spanish, and African. In second grade the focus was on the Taíno people of Puerto Rico,\* and the approach was interdisciplinary, combining social studies with math, science, and the arts. The curriculum was a special passion for Ms. Sontag, who had studied both Spanish and anthropology in college, then lived in Spain for a year.

<sup>\*</sup>Other grades studied the Incas, Mayans, Aztecs, ancient peoples of North America, American Indians, and African influence in the Caribbean.

Now she began to orchestrate a total transformation of Room 307. This would no longer be a second-grade classroom; it would be a Taíno village. "Por ejemplo, para las canoas, yo quiero canoas. No quiero *dibujos* de canoas," she declared emphatically. *There would be no drawings of canoes. Rather, there would be canoes!* She motioned toward the art supplies once again. "Van a tener que usar el papel grande y cartón para hacer canoas." The children could use large rolls of wrapping paper and cardboard to create them.

"¿Cómo?" asked a bewildered Beatríz. How could this be done?

"No sé, va a tener que hablar con su grupo," Ms. Sontag said. *I don't know; you'll have to discuss it with your group.* She was not going to give explicit instructions or demonstrate. They would have to figure out how to accomplish the task among themselves. And she had every confidence that they would do so without her assistance.

Still, Ms. Sontag was willing to push them gently in a creative direction. "Okay, ¿qué color son las canoas?" she asked Beatríz.

"Café." Beatriz responded that canoes were brown.

"¿Que color va a agarrar para los bohíos?"\* The teacher gave her another little push.

"Café claro y café oscuro." Beatríz responded that the houses were light and dark brown.

"¿Y para las hamacas?"

"Café." The hammocks should also be brown.

"¿Y las cotorras?" What about the parrots?

"Verde."

"Y rojo," contributed Damion, who thought that green parrots also had some red feathers.

"Sí, rojo también." Ms. Sontag affirmed. "Está bien." Okay, red as well. Then she instructed the class: "Quiero que vayan a sus grupos, y quiero que hablen primero, antes de tomar los materiales, para decidir que van a hacer." Go to your groups and discuss what to do before taking the materials.

The children had numerous questions about what would happen if they could not fulfill the project requirements.

<sup>\*</sup>What color are you going to grab for the houses?

"¿Qué pasa si no hay un color que necesitamos?" Liset wondered. What happens if we don't have a color that we need?

"¿Qué pasa si no se puede hacer la casa?" Veronica added with a worried look. What happens if we can't build the house?

"¿Cómo que no se puede?" Ms. Sontag replied. "¡Tiene que poder!" What do you mean you can't do it? You have to do it!

She refused to micromanage their project. Her hands and arms splayed out to the side, her eyes widened, and her face registered shock. "Por favor, vayan a los grupos." She waved them off to go to their groups and begin the work at hand.

Soon children and projects sprawled across the room, the hum of group activities everywhere. In a corner of the room, Enrique, Veronica, and Manny readied themselves to create a bohío with oversized sheets of wrapping paper. They draped the paper over two stacked chairs and collectively hoisted the chairs onto a table. Then, in a muddle of confusion, construction came to a halt. This bohío left much to be desired.

The three children reassembled in a huddle to brainstorm. They decided that the chairs should be removed. Six small hands began to crinkle the brown paper, flatten it over the table top, and fold it into a large fan. The paper now had both texture and ridges, which the children thought would look more like a rooftop. Manny ran off to find masking tape. When he returned, the paper was taped to one end of the table, one chair was placed back up, and finally the large fan was draped over the top, revealing a Taíno house.

With the bohío in its place, albeit precarious, the children turned their attention to drawing pictures of crops that could be cut out and pasted into the conuco. Conversation began in Spanish and soon turned into a debate on how yucca grow. Enrique believed that they grew on vines. Manny disputed this, pointing out that in the grocery store yucca was sometimes covered in dirt. Veronica agreed that this made a strong case for underground growth, and Enrique was convinced. But they still needed to decide how to draw guava.

"Yo tengo guayabas en mi casa," Manny reported. I have guavas at my house.

"Yo sí, pero todavia no los vi crecer." Enrique said he did, too, but hadn't seen them grow.

Although the children had all seen guavas, they apparently did not know if they grew above or below ground. They agreed that the guavas in the grocery store were smooth and clean, unlike the dirty yucca, one indication that they grew above ground on trees. Further evidence for this hypothesis was that guavas were soft, and yucca was hard. In order to grow below ground, a plant would have to be hard enough to withstand the pressure of the earth that it pushed up against.

Veronica volunteered Manny to draw the guavas. "Y tú puedes hacer las guayabas asi,"\* she said, demonstrating how she thought it should be done.

"Okay."

"¡Pero yo soy bueno para dibujar guayabas!" Enrique asserted. *But I'm good at drawing guavas!* 

"Okay, tú sabes como hacerlos," Veronica acknowledged, as if to say "So what?"

But Enrique was determined. "Dámelas," *give them to me,* he said, reaching for the crayons.

The three classmates continued to discuss the project and negotiate how to finish their tasks. Paper rustled as the finishing touches were put on guava trees, the above-ground leaves of yucca, and the corn stalks, each of which was cut and placed on the farmland. But the bohío was still flimsy, and hanging the wrapping paper over a chair to create a roof failed to give it the desired height. So the group decided to string yarn from the top of the paper to the wall. Now the house had height but no depth.

Ms. Sontag strolled by and noticed that the yarn supporting the roof had been taped to a classroom chart. She wondered aloud whether both the chart and the house would eventually fall down.

Veronica listened quietly, her once-animated face now blank. As Ms. Sontag walked away, a fog of confusion descended upon the group members. No one could think of a solution.

By now, cleanup time had arrived and all the other groups had completed their work. The *batey*, or central square, covered the floor in the middle of the room. A Taíno canoe stood near the windows, complete

<sup>\*</sup>And you can make the guavas like this.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>†</sup>Okay, you know how to make them.

with a blue-cloth Caribbean Sea with all sorts of marine life: sardines, crabs, sea turtles, and mahi-mahi. A paper-and-yarn hammock swayed in a corner of the room. The *dujo*, a specially decorated chair, was ready to be placed in the bohío. Musical instruments carefully crafted from cardboard were ready for use. Paper parrots sat in a tree in the Reading Corner. Nearby lay a buren, a large Taíno plate on which the ground yucca dough was baked and turned into casaba, a kind of bread.

But still there was no house. The group responsible decided they would need to stay in from recess to finish. A tear slid down Veronica's cheek. Skipping recess was not her concern. After all, the students usually seized any opportunity to hang out with Ms. Sontag in their secondgrade paradise. It was failure that Veronica found hard to accept.

Suddenly, the group expanded. Alicia and César helped to return the chair to the top of the table. They took large pieces of brown paper and began rolling them up lengthwise and taping each one around the table so that, together, these logs propped up the outer edges of the roof. Camilo taped the bottom of each roll to the floor to secure it in standing position. Leticia, Damion, Joaquin, and Andy joined in. All seven volunteers ended up skipping recess as well.

When the work was finished, a bohío stood complete with walls and a roof. By now it was time to line up for lunch. Only then did the construction crew join Ms. Sontag and their classmates near the classroom door.

# Constructing Identity

By exploring the cultural heritage of the Americas, focusing on one culture at each grade level, Inter-American creates a framework for in-depth and meaningful study. Ms. Sontag takes full advantage of the curriculum by turning her second-grade classroom into a Taíno village. Whether figuring out how to construct a bohío, or deciding how yucca and guava grow, the children are encouraged to draw on their prior knowledge and expand upon it, while exploring ideas and gaining confidence in their own creative abilities.

In addition, the constructivist learning environment promotes collaboration and cooperation, not competition. Seven children, on their own initiative, decided to forgo recess until all of their class-mates could join them—quite noteworthy in second grade! More important, they all pitched in to finish the job.

The school's Spanish-English emphasis was the most obvious inspiration for the Curriculum of the Americas, but there are other inherent benefits as well. Language is intertwined with culture, and history is intertwined with the present. Understanding this heritage helps Latino children in particular to figure out where they come from and who they are. But all of Ms. Sontag's students, whatever their ethnic background, benefit by learning about the interconnections between peoples. Time and space to explore other cultures as well as their own enable children to do what no one else can do for them: construct their own identity.