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Literacy Initiatives in Guatemala and Educational Fairness

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Abstract

The *Consejo de Lectura de Guatemala*, an affiliate council of the International Reading Association composed of literacy teachers and teacher-educators in Guatemala and the USA, is improving the lives of Guatemalan students and families through educational professional development. Observations conducted of Guatemalan literacy instruction demonstrate apparent gains in effectiveness and sustainability attributable to the Guatemalan Literacy Project and its companion initiatives in over twenty-plus years of continuous activity. Implications address the potential of the Consejo de Lectura to support literacy teaching and learning in Guatemala, and for this multi-faceted educational model to inform educators and policy makers in the USA.

Introduction

In 1954 the CIA supported a military coup that precipitated Guatemala's long, violent and bitter civil war. As part of the fallout from this war, systemic economic inequality that has pauperized the indigenous population, and a pervasive phallo-centric colonial culture, Guatemala has developed an inequitable and undemocratic educational system in which girls and indigenous Mayans are today still subject to inadequate and unfair treatment. Guatemala is one of the least successful educational systems with the highest dropout rate of all of Central and South America (students who drop out before grade 6). Poor literacy outcomes from the Guatemalan educational system have prompted international interventions by charities, ministries, the World Bank and many non-governmental organizations. Social justice ideals of fairness and equity in education therefore gain importance when considering the actions, role and conduct of international interventions that benefit oppressed populations (Friedland, 2004; Mayan Hands, 2013; Minnich, 2004; National Association for Multicultural Education, 2003; Ruano, 2003; Safe Passage, 2013).

The professionalism of teaching and teacher preparation in Guatemala is not well documented, with few studies available in English. Teacher preparation in Guatemala is differentiated from other Latin American countries, as Guatemala has kept in operation a system of Normales, (teacher training schools that add a fifth year of high school), certifying primary teachers without a college baccalaureate degree. In a case study of teacher professional development that took place in Guatemala, supported by USAID and the World Bank, Kline (2002) and Craig, Kraft & du Plessis (1998) sought to document promising teacher preparation practices. The researchers found that the impact of central government support for sustained professional development benefitted students.

Changes passed by the Ministry of Education in Guatemala were implemented in January, 2013, to be fully phased in by 2015, requiring three years of college in addition to completion of study at Normales. These changes prompted protests against the government's decree by education students, with sympathetic actions from current teachers. Requirements for greater rigor in teacher preparation are being contested by education students who believe that the high cost of the mandatory years of extra education will price them out of teaching as a career (La Hora, July 26, 2012) <http://www.lahora.com.gt/index.php/nacional/guatemala/reportajes-y-entrevistas/162689-un-pais-que-reprueba-en-educacion>).

Background

The International Reading Association (IRA) is a professional organization of teachers of reading and writing from early childhood through college. The IRA mission statement is: "to promote reading by continuously advancing the quality of literacy instruction and research worldwide." Further, IRA has a "Global Literacy Development Goal" to "provide leadership on literacy issues around the world" which includes the following actions:

- Advance literacy education in all nations
- Promote coherent and sustainable literacy initiatives informed by local literacy leaders
- Promote reading and writing as lifelong habits and endeavors (IRA, 2009).

In 1989, with encouragement from IRA's International Development Coordinating Committee, the Nassau Reading Council (NRC) began a Guatemalan Literacy Project (GLP) with the following initiatives: (1) book donations, (2) teacher professional development assistance, (3) inter-visitations, hosting Guatemalan educators in the US, and (4) formation and support of the Guatemalan Reading Council, the *Consejo de Lectura de Guatemala*. To date, fund-raising through the sale of Guatemalan crafts at IRA conferences and donations from IRA state councils have resulted in dissemination of over 500 Spanish language classroom mini-libraries. Teacher professional development has been provided by literacy specialist volunteers recruited from IRA councils across the USA; they travel to Guatemala at their own expense to present literacy best practice workshops to Guatemalan teachers, administrators and education students twice each year. Also, each year three or four Guatemalan public school teachers and administrators are hosted in New York homes and have the opportunity to visit US classrooms. Since its formation in 1991, the Consejo de Lectura de Guatemala has held nine biannual international literacy conferences in Guatemala City, at which educators from the United States as well as from Central and South America, Puerto Rico and New Zealand share their expertise. Each conference attracts over one thousand Guatemalan teachers and administrators that attend presentations and participate in workshops. During the non-conference years the *Consejo* organizes the professional development efforts by the volunteer literacy specialists at Guatemalan schools and *Normales* (teacher training high schools), and works with IRA representatives to strengthen organizational capacity (Cutts, 2001; *IRA Reading Today Council & Affiliate News*, 1996; Lewis-Spector & Mondschein, 2013; Nassau Reading Council, 1992; Sullivan & Glazer, 2006).

Our participation with the Guatemalan Literacy Project included the following rationales:

- To describe school and NGO practices and programs of the Consejo de Lectura de Guatemala (Pepper-Sanello & Sosin, 2009; Pepper-Sanello, Sosin, Zucaro & Rainbow, 2008).
- To explore effective, fair and sustainable approaches for international professional development in literacy education (Global Education Fund Guatemala, 2013; National Reading Panel, 2000; Rosemary, Roskos & Landreth, 2007; Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1989; Zelman, 2005).
- To investigate how the power of literacy, ideals of educational fairness and social justice, and a supportive community of teacher-learners effect social consciousness (Avivara, 2013; Freire, 1970; Villegas, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Methods

Research questions that undergird this study are:

- What reading and writing teaching practices are observed in Guatemalan primary schools? How have these practices effected student achievement?
- How do literacy professional development practices operate in the Guatemalan educational system? How do teachers and educators perceive and/or apply professional development?

- How do international educational interventions operating in concert with the Consejo de Lectura in Guatemala provide fair and high quality educational opportunities for teachers, children and families?

In visits to Guatemala from 2009 through 2013, the researchers participated and presented at Consejo de Lectura conferences, observed at Ladino and Mayan public primary schools, a private K-12 school, at Inca, a teacher training Normales high school in Guatemala City, and at two non-governmental organizations (NGOs): Safe Passage in the Guatemala City Dump community, and Mayan Hands, a weaving cooperative operated in the rural Guatemalan highlands. At the schools, surveys in Spanish were collected from cooperative teachers to determine literacy practices that were implemented in their classrooms. A classroom environment checklist was completed by observers, noting what literacy instruction-related physical objects appeared in the classrooms and environments we visited. Field notes chronicle participant-observation activities, interviews were conducted with informants: teachers, visiting educators, administrators, NGO staff, family members, students, and other on-site persons. Photos and video recordings document interviews and observed practices. Ethnographic analytic methodologies of data triangulation and constant comparative analysis on recently collected data clarifies and updates our previous findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Mills, 2006; Patton, 2002; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007; Yin, 2008).

Effects

According to informants, IRA's professional development efforts conducted in Guatemala at the biennial conference and at schools and Normales, and the Nassau Reading Council's support for reciprocal opportunities for teachers and administrators to visit classrooms in the USA, have encouraged innovation and more democratic approaches to literacy instruction in Guatemala. While instructional materials found in the primary schools were composed largely of fantasy fiction consisting of fairy and folk tales, and large leveled classroom libraries were found only at the private school and NGO site, observations and field data disclosed variation in literacy teaching practices among schools. Where prior professional development literacy interventions had taken place in the urban public and private schools and in the NGO center, observers noticed the influences of whole language instructional practices undergirded by constructivism. Reading comprehension strategy instruction was apparent in the posting of charts, dioramas, graphic organizers, and displays of cooperative learning activity products, although there were inconsistencies between grade levels and some indication of the use of rote learning as an instructional method. The rural Mayan schools visited showed less evidence of active teaching, collaborative learning, and few student-made literacy products, indicating greater reliance on rote instruction. These observations are consonant with knowledge about the disproportionate distribution of materials and professional development support between public and private, and urban Ladino schools and the rural Mayan schools in Guatemala.

Our 2009 study had inferred that the "notable exceptions," Guatemalan schools in which low income students were well served, which Willms found (2006, cited by Lora, 2008), seemed like those in observed Consejo schools. This conclusion is borne out by new data gathered in 2013. Our findings corroborate the IRA's reports on efforts to create effective and sustainable classroom literacy instructional practices in Guatemala. That over one thousand Guatemalan teachers and principals regularly attend and participate in the Consejo de Lectura's regular outreach and biennial professional development conferences demonstrates support from teachers and administrators. Additionally, the Guatemalan Ministry of Education has recognized progress in

student achievement with awards to schools and administrators. Further, the NGOs that provide educational, nutritional and medical support to Guatemalan families, such as Safe Passage and Mayan Hands, appear to have a salutary effect on academic achievement, school completion and workforce participation. (Pepper-Sanello, 2009; Pepper-Sanello, Sosin, Eichenholtz, Buttarro, 2009; USAID, 2013; World Bank, 2011).

Implications

The Consejo de Lectura is helping to build greater capacity for a fairer, equitable and more democratic educational system in Guatemala. Its educational professional development efforts and those of the observed NGOs provide greater educational opportunities to underserved Guatemalan children and families. Attention to ameliorating conditions of invidious hierarchical monism that result in inequitable treatment favoring private over public, urban over rural schools, males over females, and cultural discrimination of the Ladino over the indigenous Mayan population has the potential to enhance all students' academic success and familial life prospects. Insights gained from shared experiences with Guatemalan teachers facilitate educational opportunities that may result in greater teacher professionalism. Teachers, administrators and policy makers interested in international education have shown they value information about Guatemalan educational practices, indicated by numerous downloads of our prior NERA reports. We hope that information from our descriptive studies can improve future international professional development efforts and offer more equitable educational opportunities for teachers, students and families.

As researchers, we intend to continue participant observation and data collection in Guatemalan schools and NGOs, as our papers and presentations made at NERA and elsewhere have thus far been well received by other researchers and the public. In collaboration with the Guatemalan Reading Project, plans for future professional development activities and research are underway. Our participatory action research and observations about the systemic barriers to equitable education disclose how professional development implemented through international literacy initiatives may improve educational fairness.

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