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By Karen Stackhouse

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ACOMPARATIVESTUDYOFTHEEDUCATIONALPRACTICESANDCOMPETENCIESOFTeachersIN THEUNITEDSTATESANDGUATEMALAINTEACHINGREADING

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A Comparative Study of the Educational Practices and Competencies of Teachers in the United States and Guatemala in Teaching Reading

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I. INTRODUCTION

After speaking at the 2008 International Literacy Conference in Guatemala City, sponsored by the Guatemala Reading Association my interest was piqued, thus I began investigating literacy practices between Guatemala and the United States. Not only is illiteracy a prevalent problem in the rural parts of Guatemala, but the lack of resources sets limitations on the progress of literacy programs (Meyer, 2008). For those teachers and educators from the United States, seeing the conditions and circumstances in which their Guatemalan colleagues must strive to educate their students, it is quite a revelation.

Teaching effectively is a concept that is difficult, if not controversial to define and equally difficult to measure. To most educational planners, 'effectiveness' is the measure of factors that enhance a child's learning, irrespective of their background (Moore, DeStafano, & Adelman, 2010). While many models of school effectiveness exist, the Five-Factor model suggests that leadership, acquisition of basic skills, a secure environment, high student expectations, and frequent performance assessment are critical elements of effectiveness (Scheerens, 2000). The United States generally has these five factors, however only the element of high student expectations customarily exists in Guatemala.

This paper argues that improvements in teaching and school effectiveness require schools and educators to concentrate on even more primitive

elements than those posited by the research. While schools in the United States generally benefit from sound school buildings, regular teacher attendance, and educational supplies, this is not the case in Guatemala. In a well-established and well organized classroom, print should be everywhere. It is recommended that each classroom plan to have at least four books per child available at all times (Funk, 2008). However, due to economics, this is often not possible, so teachers visit their school or public library regularly. Books should be rotated regularly so that children are continually exposed to different genres, stories, and forms of print. In the United States, the ability to visit a school or local library is often taken for granted, but Guatemalan schools don't have school libraries and public libraries are a rarity.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As varying definitions for literacy exist, I will clarify the definition that will be used for the purposes of this article. No universal definitions or standards of literacy exist, however the United States Census Bureau states literacy can be defined as the ability to read and write at a specified age (CIA, 2010a & b). Information on literacy, while not a perfect measure of educational results, provides the most easily available and valid comparison for international comparisons. Low levels literacy and education in general, can impede the economic development of a country in the current, rapidly changing, technology driven world.

Not only is illiteracy a prevalent problem in the rural parts of Guatemala, but the lack of resources sets limitations on the progress of literacy (Meyer, 2008). Reading is among the most critical of skills teachers can equip their students with and should be taught the moment children enter the classroom. According to Barone (2006), reading and writing achievement in the primary grades provide the critical foundation for a child's future academic success. The ability to read not only impacts students' ability to succeed academically, but to also contribute as a constructive member of their society. One of the best predictors of whether a child will function competently in school and go on to

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contribute actively in our increasingly literate society is the level to which the child progresses in reading and writing (Meyer, 2008). Although reading and writing abilities continue to develop throughout one's life, the years from birth through age eight are the most important period for literacy development (NAYEC & IRA, 1998).

Reading is not a skill learned passively. It requires dedicated attention and persistent practice. The amount of time teachers devote to teaching reading and practice is crucial for a student's literacy development, especially in the primary grades. Research strongly suggests that the total amount of reading done in the beginning stages of learning to read has a powerful effect on reading achievement (Moore, 2005). Reading aloud to students can also enhance student comprehension, another skill pertinent for progression in reading. According to the NAEYC and IRA Reading Panel (1998) the single most important activity for building understanding and skills essential for reading success appears to be reading aloud to children. It is further beneficial that students have access to print versions of those books read aloud. Stories read aloud do not always accomplish literacy support unless there is discussion about the story and children can revisit the story whenever they would like (Funk, 2008). Having these books available will assist in maximizing the literacy experience.

Research suggests that an effective vocabulary program includes many opportunities for young students to hear high-quality literature aloud (Moore, 2005). Similarly, the NAEYC and IRA (1998) have found evidence that a child's vocabulary increases through listening to stories couple with a teacher's explanation of the text. Student comprehension, another skill relevant for progress in reading will generally be enhanced from oral reading and text explanation as well.

The amount of time spend reading, which in turn depends upon the availability of reading materials, greatly affects student improvement in reading comprehension and vocabulary skills. The importance of reading becomes even more crucial in poverty stricken schools because students often do not have access to books or other educational materials at home. Children growing up in poverty, whether urban or rural, have a lot of school-related vocabulary learning to do to catch up with their more advantaged peers. In order to develop an adequate school-related vocabulary, some students may need many more opportunities to engage in vocabulary study early in preschool and kindergarten (Moore, 2005). By one estimate, the typical middle-class child enters first grade with 1,000 to 1,700 hours of one-on-one picture book reading, whereas a child from a low-income family averages just 25 hours (Adams, 1990). This gap between children's literacy development was due to the disparity in reading opportunities they were provided. It is important for teachers to immerse

children in a print rich environment full of storybooks, posters, and word walls to create an atmosphere full of opportunities that nurture their reading development.

III. GUATEMALA

There really is no system of Mayan education as such. There is no curriculum, the very first seeds of it are Mayan schools...These are small seeds, small efforts in this direction...But if we speak of Mayan education itself in our current situation, perhaps the one thing that has contributed most to the formation of our identity and our culture is what there has been in the way of an oral tradition passed down from generation to generation, from grandparents to grandchildren, from parents to children in the family and community life. It is that which has shaped our survival and our lives through agriculture and education within the family, because Mayan education cannot really be separated from life, from economic activity, from politics, from all aspects of life. (Interview with Juana Vasquez, conducted by Meike Heckt, July 1994).

With this quote from Guatemalan educator, Juana Vasquez, we can begin to gain insight in into how different the Mayan education system is from that of the United States. Mayan education, which dominates rural Guatemala, and most of Guatemala is rural, is a less formal style, often focusing on elements of learning from one's family, and the passing down material through oral story telling.

The Guatemalan Civil War ran from 1960 to 1996. Torn by those decades of strife and dissention and a long neglected system of education, Guatemala has one of the lowest literacy rates in the Western Hemisphere (Jonas, 2000). In some regions, nearly three out of every four adults can not read or write. These staggering statistics are the result of an absence of fundamental learning tools. Over 90% of schools lack textbooks and basic library books and fewer than 5% of Guatemalan children have ever used a computer (Guatemala Literacy Project, 2010).

Education is generally considered to play a critical role in the reconstruction process and the state should promote and guarantee the right to public, high-quality education for all, address all levels of schooling provision, and guarantee equality, inclusiveness and non-discrimination (Dupry, 2008; Rose and Greeley, 2006; Smith, 2005; Tomasevski, 2004). New opportunities can be supported through education in any situation, but specifically in post-conflict situations while assisting in making a new start by changing the structures and strengthening the positive role of education through the promotion of expansion and a different content of education (Poppema, 2009). Unless there are substantial changes, the unequal distribution of education will continue to preserve positions of economic, social, and political privilege that often

represent the underlying causes of conflicts (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). This process requires more than a short term, practical reconstruction of the educational system: in order to achieve social justice, a more complex approach that comprises the complete transformation of educational systems is needed (Novelli & Cardozo, 2008; Paulson & Rapple, 2007).

One can not research instructional styles and strategies in rural Guatemala without focusing on the Mayan people. One problem that arises is the generalization used in terms of describing the Mayan culture. Often times, no distinction is made between the Mayans and Ladinos, although it is functionally necessary to differentiate within the two groups, given that these are made up of different ethnic groups and cultural traditions (Heckt, 1999). In 1995 the Government and the URNG guerilla movement signed the "Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples," recognizing four groups of people within Guatemala; the Mayans, the Ladinos, the Garifuna, and the Xinca. Like the Mayans, the Xinca are also regarded as indigenous peoples. The Garifunas are descended from Caribbean immigrants and have their own language. All of the non-indigenous and non-Garifunas

in Guatemala are called Ladinos (Smith, 1990). The Mayan people comprise 60% of the population of Guatemala and can be referred to as indigenous. "Indigena" is the general term for the Mayan people. The word comes from "Indian" and despite its negative connotation, most people currently use this term when referring to the Mayan population. The other group is called "Ladino." This term evolved after the 16th century and is now used by the Guatemala state to designate in general the "non-Indian" (Meyerratken, 2000). The official languages of Guatemala are Spanish (Ladino population) and twenty-one different dialects of the Mayan language. Examples of some of the different Mayan languages include Kiche, Ma'm, and Kaq'shikel (Meyerratken, 2000). These Mayan dialects account for 40-60% of the languages spoken by the people of Guatemala and this linguistic diversity of the Mayan population poses a challenge to the Guatemalan education system (Meyerratken, 2000). This is one of the reasons teaching children to read in Guatemala has proven so tremendously difficult. Looking at the tables below (CIA, 2010a & b) you will see that the illiteracy rate has fluctuated somewhat, but generally remain quite high.

Table 1 : Guatemala Literacy Rates

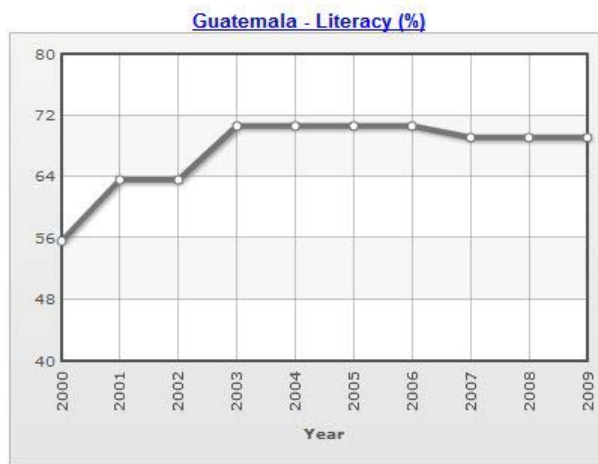
Year	Literacy (%)
2000	55.6
2001	63.6
2002	63.6
2003	70.6
2004	70.6
2005	70.6
2006	70.6
2007	69.1
2008	69.1
2009	69.1

(CIA, 2010a)

While some of the research I have read mentions textbooks (Guatemala Literacy Project, 2010; Meyerratken, 2000), I feel obligated to point out that the schools I visited in rural Guatemalan villages such as Santa Barbara, Patulul, Rio Bravo, and Tuxtla had few, if any textbooks from which to teach their students. According to Meyerratken (2000), textbooks have been translated into all Mayan dialects so that students can learn material in their native tongue while also learning Spanish, however by middle school, the entire curriculum is taught in Spanish.

Local teachers among the indigenous people are recruited by the government to teach children in their own language and in a more maternal instructional style.

Table 2 : Guatemala Literacy Rates



(CIA, 2010a)

Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult to recruit such teachers as pay is extremely low. On average, teachers in Guatemala earn only 1200 Quetzales, or \$200 a month (Guatemala Reading Association, 2011). While the standard of living in Guatemala is not quite that of the United States, \$200 a month still doesn't stretch much further than basic living quarters and food. Few families in rural Guatemala own motor vehicles, rather walking is their primary means of transportation. Homes largely consist of four walls, with no plumbing, running water, or electricity (see photos below)

A typical Guatemalan home in Santa Barbara



During my visit to the rural school in Santa Barbara, Guatemala, I reflected on the fact that in the United States, teachers have resources composed of the most recently published curricula, books, and available technology. In contrast, the indigenous people in Santa Barbara seemed to live the same way they have for hundreds of years. They had a striking simplicity to their everyday lives that showed me that we will not be able to simply take the instructional strategies and methodologies that work so well in the United States and apply them to the Guatemalan schools. The complexity of our teaching proves irrelevant to them. How is a child who lives on a basic diet of tortillas, beans, and corn to learn about nutrition and the food pyramid? Many of the food identified in the food pyramid don't exist in their diet regardless as to whether we teach in English or their native tongue. For the people of Guatemala, we must teach at the concrete level. It is not a simple matter of translation.

IV. UNITED STATES

1. It being one chiefe project if that ould deluder, Satan, to keepe men from the knowledge of the Scriptures, as in former times by keeping them in an unknown tongue, so in these latter times, by perswading from the use of tongues, that so at least the true sence & meaning of the origniall might be clouded by false glosses of saint seeming deceivers, that learning may not be buried in the grave of our fathers in the church & commonwealth, the Lord assisting our endeavors.
2. It is therefore ordered, that every towneship in this jurisdiction, after the Lord hath increased them to the number of 50 householders, shall then forthwith appoint one within their towne to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write & read, who wages shall be paid either bythe parents or the masters of such children, or by the inhabitants ingenerall...

In 1647, the General Court of Massachusetts enacted the above law to protect the children of the colony from the confines of Satan. The law became more commonly known as "Ould Deluder" and served, in part, as a catalyst for the development of materials and instructional strategies to teach children to read.

Reading has evolved since 1647. Originally taught as a means to read the Bible in an effort to keep the devil away, reading has now progressed into the topic of literacy, also including writing. Back in the mid-1600's oral reading and recitation ruled. It wouldn't be until much later when educators would begin looking at comprehension. World War I led to the discovery that thousands of U.S. soldiers could not read well enough to follow printed instructions (Smith, 2002), thus reading became a household concern almost overnight. William S. Gray would become the first president of the International Reading Association to state that silent reading is more practical, more efficient, and more effective than the regular regime of oral reading (Shannon, 1989). Not quite three decades later, it was finally agreed that deriving meaning was more important than reciting (Smith, 2002).

While new definitions of reading have always been thoughtful and plentiful, no one contributed to the field more than Columbia University's Edward Thorndike. Thorndike clearly showed the difference between mouthing words and understanding meaning. He demonstrated the need for instruction in getting meaning from the printed page. He also raised the issue of misunderstanding and attributed it in part to the over-potency of certain words (Russell, 1961).

1. It appears likely that a pupil may read fluently and feel that the series of words are arousing appropriate thoughts without really understanding the paragraph. Reading is a very elaborate procedure, involving a weighing of each of many elements in a sentence, their organization in the proper relations one to another, the selection of certain of their connotations and the rejection of others, and the cooperation of many forces to determine final responses. Understanding a paragraph is like solving a problem in mathematics. It consists in selecting the right element of the situation and putting them together in the right relations, and also with the right amount of weigh to influence or force for each. The mind is assailed...by every word in the paragraph. It must select, repress, soften, emphasize, correlate and organize, all under the influence of the right mental set or purpose or demand. (Thorndike, 1917)

Thorndike is still one of the most cited experts of the scientific period for his declaration that reading is thinking.

Dilemmas from the past continue to creep into the present, and eventually our future. Teachers still

struggle to teach vocabulary and in an environment of high-stakes testing, (an issue not present in Guatemala) it is a "hot topic" (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2003). Teachers of history, science, and other content areas have not yet lent their unanimous support to use of literacy strategies to increase understanding (Jacobs, 2002). Throughout the previous century, reading educators have not been able to form a consensus about the part phonics play in

Table 3 : United State's Literacy

Year	Literacy (%)
2000	97
2001	97
2002	97
2003	97
2004	97
2005	97
2006	99
2007	99
2008	99
2009	99

As time progresses, the debates rage on. However, we do know that building strong reading skills is a complex task that requires time, access, emphasis, skilled reading teachers, and a supportive administration. Additionally, many students are lack explicit instruction in reading skills. Current research indicates that organized, direct instruction in linguistic understanding, phonetic rules and word attack strategies are essential components of a successful reading program, but many of today's teachers have not received the necessary training to promote those skills in their students (Liuzzo-Jeup, 2011). Instruction needs to include strategies that help develop phonemic awareness in emerging readers; the ability to analyze, combine, and connect the smallest units of sound with the letters that represent them. Researchers have found a strong correlation between a lack of phonemic awareness and reading failure.

According to The California Task Force on Reading: Every Child a Reader (1995), a balanced reading program should include (a) a strong literature, language, and comprehensive program that includes a balance of oral and written language; (b) an organized, explicit skills program that includes phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding skills to address the needs of the emergent reader; (c) an ongoing diagnosis that informs teaching and assessment and ensures accountability; and (d) a powerful early intervention program that provides individual tutoring for children at

the reading process: In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the debate continues (Robinson, 2005a). The concept of comprehension is still loosely defined in teachers' and students' experience (Robinson, 2005b). Robinson (2005b) reported that educators still have not decided whether comprehending means being able to retell text or if it has more to do with the reader's previous knowledge that he or she brings to the topic.

Table 4 : United States Literacy



risk for reading failure. In order to fulfill the needs of a program with these characteristics, the following elements must be present (a) instruction in phonemic awareness; (b) systematic, explicit phonics instruction; (c) sound-symbol relationships; (d) instruction in decoding; (e) word attack skills; (f) spelling instruction; (g) comprehension instruction; and (h) independent reading of high-quality books. What it boils down to are alarming statistics. According to the most recent study from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2010), 44% of U.S. students in elementary and high school read below the basic level, meaning they exhibit little or no mastery of the knowledge and skills necessary to perform work at each grade level. For a country that prides itself on being a world leader, the United States has immense room for improvement.

V. CONCLUSION

According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), literacy is defined as "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential (2011). One measure of literacy is the percentage of adults who perform at four achievement levels: Below Basic, Basic, Intermediate, and Proficient. In each type of literacy, in 2003, 13% of adults in the United States were at or above Proficient, indicating they possess the skills necessary to perform complex and challenging literacy activities. 22% of adults were Below

Basic, indicating they possess no more than the most simple and concrete literacy skills.

Guatemala does not have organizations such as NAAL or NAEP to monitor their literacy rate like the United States does. Rather, they struggle with the bare necessities of day to day living. While comparing the United States to Guatemala may seem like comparing apples and oranges, one can't help but to realize that these two very different countries, have one alarmingly commonality. Both countries are struggling to teach their children to read.

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