

## ***Reading and Writing in Guatemala***

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In this article I present the many obstacles that teachers and students confront daily in Guatemalan schools. I explore the country's educational system and present the voices of 515 Guatemalan teachers who represent 50 schools including both rural and urban schools. The teachers completed a survey consisting of 22 questions using the Likert scale format plus nine questions conducted in an interview format. The emphasis of the questions was the education of monolingual and bilingual populations. The results were examined using a Kruskal-Wallis analysis. Data suggest teachers in Guatemala (1) lack the adequate preparation to unite theory and practice in the classroom. (2) do not identify indigenous languages as factors in the planning of classroom curriculum and, (3) focus more on teaching isolated unrelated skills than on the development of critical thinking in their students.

There are many factors like hygiene within schools, the academic preparation of instructors, low salaries, the materials provided by the government for the education and completion of assignments by students, and the lack of libraries in many of the schools in Guatemala that impact the level of education to which the children of Guatemala can aspire. Many children have grown up watching as their parents struggle to secure the financial means to feed them. The National Institute of Statistics reports that five percent of children in Guatemala live on the streets, another ten percent is able to meet their most basic needs, and an alarming eighty-five percent live in constant danger (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas , 2002). Estimates reflect that 75 percent of the population of Guatemala lives below the poverty line (The World Fact Book, 2004). Immigrants to the United States from Guatemala provide financial support to 30 percent of Guatemalans (Ministry of Public Health, 2005). Maybe it's because Guatemala is a country where many citizens still lack access to basic health care such as immunizations and suffer from hunger that illiteracy does not receive the attention it merits. Lack of education keeps the poor living in substandard housing and prevents much of the country's population from forging a better future for its children.

## **Obstacles to Education**

Factors that contribute to the illiteracy of many Guatemalans include poverty which many within society accept as the norm for indigenous people, the educational curriculum, level of academic preparation of teachers, the lack of classroom materials such as textbooks for every student, ethnicity of the person, and whether they are male or female. In Guatemala about 60% of the students live in rural areas, while 75% of the schools are located in urban regions, 58% of the municipalities have a middle school and only 8% have a High School (UNICEF, 2005). The educational system does not limit class size; in regions of the country such as El Quiche a teacher is usually overseeing 30 to 60 students (Rubio & Chesterfield, 1998). Estimates suggest that in 2005 71% of Guatemalan children attended school. About one third of the students who enroll in the first grade continue enrolled in school. In a country where education is supposed to be mandatory until the sixth grade, it was determined in 2005 that less than half of all adults in the country had completed the sixth grade (Friedland, 2005).

In Guatemala many children realize at an early age, usually by the third grade, that education is not within their reach and that the future holds few opportunities for them. The newspaper La Prensa Libre evaluated 19,548 first grade students and 16,770 third grade students of four different regions of the country who spoke languages such as K'iche, Kaqchiquel, G'eqchi and Mam. They determined that 52.4% of the students in first grade could not comprehend simple sentences and 50% of the students in third grade could not understand books written for their grade level. In 2005 Vasquez presented the results of an investigation conducted by Fernando Rubio, director of MEDIR; a program entrusted with measuring and evaluating education levels. The results suggest that 43% of students leave school after the completion of first grade because they have little success or cannot afford to continue in school. About 50% of those entering the third grade leave school by the end of the school year for the same reason. The director of MEDIR concluded and voiced out that in Guatemala "The instruction of elementary school is deficient. Immediate responsive actions are needed" (Vasquez, 2005).

## **Preparation of Teachers**

To be a teacher in Guatemala there is no requirement to attend a University. It is possible to begin a career as a teacher after completing a program in education that consists of coursework only during the two last years of high school (Kossack, Friedland, & Richards 2005). The Guatemalan department of education does not require any university level course for teachers (M. Recinos de Leon, Comunicacion Personal, February 21, 2005). Very few of

Guatemala's teachers live in proximity to a university or have access to one. As a result teachers teaching methods reflect the ones their instructors used to teach them. Another problem for education in Guatemala is that much of the population feels that in order to learn one must work extremely hard. They feel that learning cannot be a pleasurable experience (Heckt, 1999). To investigate and compare the education level of instructors who work in rural and urban areas I conducted a survey with instructors of 37 different schools. The results clearly show that instructors who have completed university course work usually work in private urban schools, while those who have not work in rural areas.

The level of preparation of the instructor has a definite impact on how and what students learn. In many of Guatemala's schools students learn by copying word by word from the blackboard or textbooks. This occurs both in private and public schools. Students learn that they are only allowed to speak when spoken to. When students are asked to engage in answering questions they are expected to give an answer that coincides with the opinion of the instructor. Most students are not expected or required to work as groups in projects and they are not taught to critically examine textbooks to discern what biases authors pass along to readers. Respect for adults is an important basis for education. When someone visits a classroom students are expected to stand and recite a memorized song welcoming the person. Although this gesture is part of Guatemalan culture and it's accepted as a sign of good manners and education in many Latin American countries, it could also be the means by which this society does not promote individuality, democracy and the rights of each and all citizens.

### **Economic Factors**

Students as well as instructors struggle to secure the financial means to live and study. From 1992 to 2002, 16% of all Guatemalan citizens struggled to meet their financial obligations with the equivalent of one United States dollar a day. Fifty two percent of the indigenous population that resides in rural areas do not have a bathroom in their homes. Child mortality in children under the age of five was found to be 47% (UNICEF, 2005). With all these limitations students are expected to come up with approximately 50 United States dollars a year to attend school (Department of Health, 2005). Students are required to wear uniforms to school, unless they are indigenous, and they are also expected to purchase all their own school materials. Many families are unable to meet the expenses associated with an education, as a result many students begin their studies only to drop out soon after or they simply never enroll in school.

Salaries for teachers in Guatemala are very low. New teachers usually make the equivalent of 173 US dollars a month. The cost of renting a small apartment in the capital is

equivalent if not more than this amount. Teachers with more years of experience earn anywhere from \$200 to \$250 US dollars a month. Those teachers with 30 plus years experience earn about \$575 US dollars a month. Many of Guatemala's teachers have more than one job in order to survive. Some will work the morning shift at a public school only to work in the afternoon at a private school. Those who work in a private versus a public school can expect to earn 100 US dollars more a month and if they are bi-lingual in English and Spanish, they may make 250 US dollars more a month. It's important to emphasize that many teachers are not deterred by the lack of monetary rewards in their profession. They strive to teach to the best of their abilities.

One of the major problems that teachers in Guatemala face is the limited amount of classroom textbooks. The Ministry of Education provides some standard reading and math textbooks but they do not provide story-books, poetry books, etc. Classrooms are small compared to the 30, 40 or even 60 desks that are packed in them. Some of the classrooms are so packed that the teacher is unable to walk around the desks to check the students' progress. Lighting can be strained in classrooms that have few windows. The vast majority of schools lack a library. Many of the libraries that do exist are a result of a grant secured by either a school or a teacher. An investigation conducted of 29 urban schools revealed that 19 of the 29 schools investigated had a library. Interestingly, out of the 19 who had a library 17 had been financed by monetary donations received by North Americans.

### **Bilingual Education in Guatemala**

Bilingual education can be found as an instructional method mostly in rural remote multi-age schools. The bilingual education that does exist is geared toward indigenous populations of select regions. This bilingual education is not based on teaching the mechanism of reading and writing, but rather is instruction that is focused on phonics to teach Kaqchikel or other indigenous languages. In a country where 21 different Mayan languages and 150 dialects have been identified, the norm is to instruct in Spanish (Friedland & Méndez, 2005). Since most of the education in Guatemala is in Spanish, the indigenous suffers the disadvantage of not being able to relate what he/she is learning in school with what happens at home. Books are very expensive in Guatemala and very few of those available are written in indigenous languages.

The indigenous account for 55% of Guatemala's population. The quality and availability of education varies from one region to another within the country. Illiteracy varies from 9.7% in the capitol to 48.92% in regions such as El Quiche. Another ten regions have illiteracy rates of 20-30%, while another eight regions have illiteracy rates of 30-40% (Guatemalan Ministry of Education, 2005). In the year 2000, it was reported that 69% of the citizens of Guatemala were

illiterate (UNICEF, 2005). From 1996 to 2003, 78% of children were enrolled in school (UNICEF, 2005). What happens to the other 22%? Many of the country's rural schools employ three or less teachers. The Ministry of Education reports that these schools usually enroll students of various age groups and educational levels and places them all in the same classroom. In El Quiche, a rural region of Guatemala, 64 % of schools fit this model of education. This is an alarming reality! The rest of the country averages 48.6% of schools fitting this model which is equivalent to 524 schools. 71% of males attend school and 69% of females (Rubio & Chesterfield, 1998). What about the remaining 29% males and 31% females?

### **Sharing This Investigation**

In this work I begin to document the obstacles identified in combating illiteracy in Guatemala with the hope that with an increased awareness of reality the educational system can be improved. It is important that change occur in this beautiful country that is economically poor but rich in cultural diversity. I began my study with the following questions:

1. How is a child taught to read in Guatemala?
2. How is a child taught to write in Guatemala?
3. What obstacles do teachers face while teaching in rural and urban regions of Guatemala?

### **Methodology**

I went to Guatemala with a group of North American professors in 2005. Our goal was for every one of the teachers in this trip to offer 10 workshops to instructors of rural and urban regions [Workshops sites were chosen by the board of the Guatemalan Literacy Council]. Six of the eight members of our group had previously visited the country to give workshops. Some days we stayed in Guate, the capitol, to conduct our workshops. Other days we traveled up to 2 hours to arrive to the site of our workshop usually in an isolated region. The teachers who attended our workshops and completed my survey did so voluntarily. They paid a small fee to participate in the workshops. I was able to meet my goal of encountering teachers who work and teach different grade levels and in different regions of the country. The information that I share is to some degree limited since the teachers that were part of the survey were those that I encountered in the regions of Guatemala that I visited. Teachers from the far north region where there are few schools were not included. Taking all this into account, it is my opinion that 515 teachers allows the formation of a beginning understanding of the educational environment that both teachers and students in Guatemala encounter.

## **The Survey**

I developed the questions in the survey with the objective of better understanding the philosophy of teaching used in Guatemala, as well as to identify the obstacles teachers encounter.

### The questions related to reading were focused on:

1. The differences between learning to read a native language versus a second language.
2. The student's ability to focus on characters in short stories and the development of the character.
3. Whether or not a student can identify a favorite author.
4. The nature of student's motivation; intrinsic versus extrinsic.
5. Independent reading done for pleasure and reading done in groups.
6. The ability of the instructor to identify the level of reading proficiency in students.
7. Materials available to the teacher for instruction.

### The questions related to writing were focused on:

1. The relationship between reading and writing.
2. Whether or not students are accustomed to writing collaboratively in small groups.
3. The difference in learning to write a native language at home and learning to write Spanish at school.
4. How teachers define writing.
5. If students are taught how to write strategically.
6. If students engage during writing instruction.
7. Vocabulary acquisition during the writing process.

## **Results and implications of the survey**

In this section of the article I will offer a summary of what teachers brought up the most, identified as their instructional method, and explained to be their challenge. I will focus on what I believe will be of most interest to the reader, and not on all the results. The results obtained from the survey using the Likert scale and the interview questions reveal two main concerns shared by most teachers, they are: maintaining the interest of the students in learning and knowing how to teach well. With the results I was able to identify answers shared by the majority

of the teachers, what appeared to be obvious to me but was not voiced, and what few teachers considered most important (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The model developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) was useful in preparing a summary of the results obtained because it enabled me to determine the cause behind the phenomenon/situation, the context, and the conditions that intervene and affect a situation. One of the ongoing themes identified in the answers, from both rural and urban teachers, is the need for further preparation for teachers before they begin to work in schools. Most teachers find it difficult to explain why they teach the way they do (Daniel, 2006; 2007).

Teachers expressed a shared desire to improve their current educational system and personal instructional methods. However, they also expressed they are limited by Guatemala's government, their economic reality, and the fiscal condition of the current schools. All the teachers agreed that students learn to write by copying word for word from either the blackboard or a textbook (Daniel, 2006; 2007). This response is interesting, and suggests that teachers did not fully comprehend the question they were being asked. There is a difference between writing that focuses on the act, and learning to write which is geared toward developing ideas in composition. Someone who is properly trained in the process of teaching writing composition would understand the difference between the two concepts. Could it be that teachers themselves were never shown how to develop ideas in composition so they do not grasp the concept of freely expressing individual ideas?

### **Instruction of Bilingual students**

Most of Guatemala's instruction is Spanish based, with few exceptions in rural areas. Bilingual education is limited to few schools and then further limited to certain grade levels i.e. first, second. It's important to note that most instructors don't consider students who speak Spanish and a native language as bilingual. Most instructors surveyed responded to the notion of a bilingual student as someone who speaks Spanish and English. Out of all the instructors surveyed only 11 were found to teach using a bilingual approach, an example given by one instructor was that she offered bilingual curriculum in her classroom since she would sing to her students during class in Kaqchikel, a native language (Daniel, 2006; 2007).

### **Reading**

Both teachers and students are limited by the availability of books. Due to this, students in many schools are forced to read the same book over and over. Those students who reside in regions that are severely limited financially are unable to engage in voluntary reading, or borrow

books to take home. Most all instructors expressed a need for more books that are of interest to their students and age appropriate (Daniel, 2006; 2007). One of the teachers was visibly frustrated as she kept repeating that many times students have no choice but to re-read a book because “there are no other books”.

### **Writing**

The results obtained from the survey suggest that teachers lack an efficient model for teaching writing composition to their students. I share these answers to help the reader understand how I reached my conclusions. Nine out of the teachers surveyed said they begin to teach their students how to write using a picture or a drawing and asking the students to describe the piece in a short story. Others ask their students to read from a text book and then to draw the main ideas they identified as a means to begin the writing process. Ten instructors mentioned they ask their students to form groups without giving them instructions on what to do when they have formed the groups. Many instructors defined writing composition as grammar and copying down lectures. Some teachers defined writing as (1) a focus on spelling, (2) answering questions prepared by the teacher, (3) dictation, (4) using punctuation properly and, (5) developing vocabulary (Daniel, 2006; 2007).

### **Other Problems**

The Guatemalan government requires that students be tested. However, they fail to provide teachers with well-designed standardized tests. As a result, one student can be promoted to the next grade level while another is held back even when they both have achieved the same level of mastery. Many teachers express frustration with the lack of equity that pervades their world. Another unaddressed problem discussed by the teachers is the special needs student because the system offers no adjustments to teach nor to evaluate these learners.

### **The Future**

Students and teachers are faced with an enormous challenge in Guatemala every day. Illiteracy is a mayor problem, yet society in Guatemala has failed to treat it as such. A foreign visitor to the country like me can easily ignore the problem by focusing on the beautiful hand made crafts sold all over the country for pocket change. Many Guatemalans are left with no choice but to work making and selling crafts their entire life because they lack the preparation to do anything else. These economic struggles will continue for Guatemalan citizens if they are not

offered access to education. However, I feel optimism because I repeatedly heard teachers' eagerness to improve the Guatemalan educational system. Many teachers consistently attend workshops held by the Guatemalan Literacy Council (Friedland & Kossack, 2004) while others flock to the workshops organized by our group. Guatemalan teachers understand that in their limited environment students can only be as prepared as their teachers are.

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