

Keeping *La Llorona* Alive in the Shadow of Cortés: What an Examination of Literacy in Two Mexican Schools Can Teach U.S. Educators

Anne-Marie Hall
University of Arizona

Abstract

This article, a 5-month ethnographic research in Oaxaca, Mexico, examines various aspects of the literacy curriculum in 2 Mexican primary schools. The author observed and interviewed 35 students in 6th grade and 7 teachers in 2 schools, as well as examined student writing and teaching materials. The research suggests that though the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (Secretary of Public Education, SEP) of Mexico mandates progressive educational theories, in practice, the national curriculum reinforces the Spanish colonialist views of indigenous languages and beliefs. In addition, there is a powerful intimate culture of children and families who interact with this curriculum. This study looks at what happens when the ideas and practices of the SEP collide with indigenous traditions, and what U.S. educators can learn from this.

During a recent 5-month sabbatical in Southern Mexico, I studied how writing was taught, and the theories and assumptions that informed pedagogy in two Mexican primary schools. I encountered both the official national curriculum and the daily lived curriculum. The former advocated current theories about teaching writing I could easily support (writing frequently for different purposes and audiences, and employing writing as a tool for learning in all subjects); at the same time, it overemphasized the prescriptive and formal qualities of writing. These emphases, as Jiménez, Smith, and Martínez-León (2003) have argued, continue the Spanish colonialist views, a la Cortés, about the inferiority of indigenous languages and beliefs and an overconcern with formal aspects of writing (pp. 491–492). Comparing education across cultures commands attention to borders and it is a “very short step from marking borders to defending them” (Alexander, 2001, p. 507). It was the daily lived curriculum that drew me to borders, and to both the sharp distinctions as well as the similarities between literacy education in Mexico and the United States.

Competing with the national view of language is the powerful intimate culture of the children and their families, a living, breathing, dynamic oral tradition with myths and legends such as *La Llorona*, the Weeping Woman, that has a significance frequently more charged than any present reality. Levinson (1996) defined intimate cultures as “the local configurations of people who share common social positions and practical ideologies” (p. 215). I would agree but also argue that intimate cultures include the imaginative world of stories and oral traditions shared by the community that shape them.

Given that few children in the rural schools in Oaxaca attend school past the sixth grade (Izquierdo & Sánchez, 2000) and have limited opportunities for economic rewards if they do add more schooling, the culture of literacy that I am prone to defend and that is advocated in the official materials of the curriculum does not exert a strong influence on the southern parts of Mexico. Rather the cultural artifacts of myth and legend become the more powerful message systems as they occur again and again in the curriculum.

I will report on various aspects of the literacy curriculum in Southern Mexico—reading, writing, and oral expression—and assert how culturally embedded education is and how literacy education transcends borders yet retains its particularities within different locales. While comparing pedagogies tends to lend itself to the very defensive posturing that Alexander (2001) has warned about, he suggests that comparative pedagogues instead ask what happens to a comparativist’s ideas and practices “when they collide with indigenous traditions within different cultural settings” Why do some ideas “take” and “are domesticated while others do not?” (p. 508) For example, can current theory about the teaching of writing in the United States be imported or exported at will? How does it change when confronted with indigenous cultures in another country? And what can U.S. educators learn from this when teaching students from rural Mexico?

Rationale for Comparing Pedagogies

In U.S. schools, the number of students of Mexican descent has grown dramatically and continues to rise (Campbell, Hombro, & Mazzeo, 2000). Furthermore, indigenous people from Southern Mexico have entered the United States in ever-increasing numbers, with indigenous people from Oaxaca comprising the largest indigenous group from Mexico currently working in the United States (Zabin, Kearney, García, Runsten, & Nagengast, 2004). These new immigrants lack the experience and social network support system that have assisted immigrants from areas with a longer migrant tradition. As a consequence, these groups have greater difficulties integrating into and/or interacting with not only American society and culture as a whole but also the “mainstream” Latin American immigrant population (CLNet, 2003). At the same time, it has been well documented that children of Mexican immigrants continue

to lag behind in literacy achievement (McCarthy, García, López-Velásquez, Lin, & Guo, 2003; Nieto, 2002) and receive few opportunities to write about personal experiences in schools (Moll, 1990). Yet when their backgrounds are valued, these students achieve high levels of literacy (McCarthy et al., 2003; Moll, 1990). In addition, U.S. educators are increasingly under pressure from the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and other initiatives mandating English-only classrooms¹ to teach children who are culturally different with few resources to understand or accommodate that differentness.

Others have also argued that the relationship between schooling in Mexico and the practices of everyday life has not received systematic attention, making it urgent to conduct research with sustained observations and interviews in order to “construct a compelling interpretation of the effects of schooling” (Levinson & Holland, 1996, p. 19). It is important to know what and how Mexican students in the United States have been taught about literacy in Mexico. Some researchers assert that the flow of information is North to South and the invasion of U.S. culture is a one-way street, making mainstream U.S. culture and curriculum “untouched by Mexico in ways meaningful for education” (Smith, Jiménez, & Martínez-León, 2003, p. 488). In other words, ideas from the United States pervade Mexico through a variety of means, yet few ideas from Mexico seem to be known, studied or valued in the United States. Finally, if U.S. educators can learn more about what happens *inside* classrooms in Mexico, perhaps they can contribute to the creation of new materials, and better serve immigrant populations (Jiménez et al., 2003).

Southern Mexico and the Mexican Education System

It is said that when asked to describe the topography of Mexico, the 15th-century Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés took a piece of paper, crunched it into a ball, and threw it on the ground (though I am incredulous that Cortés would have been that wasteful of his scarce resources). Surely the topography of Southern Mexico resembles the image of crumpled paper. In the southern states such as Oaxaca and Chiapas, steep mountains and barely passable roads create extreme isolation and sharp dichotomies between the urban and rural. The majority of people are concentrated in one or two major cities (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática, 2006; S!Paz, 2002). I would caution, therefore, that an ethnographic study of schools in the southern states of Mexico is not readily generalizable to other parts of the country where the geographic features are vastly different.

The beginning of public education in Mexico is credited to José Vasconcelos, the first Secretary of Public Education in 1921. He argued that education be a public, governmental responsibility. The early 1922 curriculum he mandated stressed his beliefs that education should “reach the ‘humble’ to create a nation of producers rather than consumers and to form citizens with analytical capacity” (Schell, 2003, p. 30). While there was much iteration of

Vasconelos' beliefs, it was not until the late 1980s that a national curriculum matured and was implemented. This curriculum reform resembled "back to basics" in the United States, with emphases on reading, writing, oral expression as well as mathematics (emphasizing posing and solving problems), social sciences (geography, history, and civics), and health care and the environment.

In Mexico today, there are three levels of schools: primary (U.S. Grades 1 to 6), secondary (U. S. Grades 7 to 9), and preparatory (U.S. Grades 10 to 12). Only primary and secondary schools are free—meaning students are provided with textbooks and pay minimal tuition. Each year schools charge fees ranging from 10 dollars per family in rural areas to 150 dollars per family in some urban areas. In addition, primary and secondary schools are classified as rural or urban according to their geographic locations. Rural and urban schools—both private and public—use the same textbooks in all subjects, produced and provided by the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (SEP). There are also some indigenous schools that have separate textbooks printed in the native language of the students.

Method

My research extended over 5 months and was conducted in two primary schools: one rural and one urban. In addition to 3 months in the classrooms, I spent the other 2 months interviewing teachers and writing and verifying data with them.

Rural School

I spent 2 months in a small rural school 17 miles outside of Oaxaca City. According to information provided in an interview with the Director of Victoriano E. Flores Primary School, Ignacio López Mortesinos, there are 166 families and 648 people in the village, and 101 students in the primary school (personal communication, January 23, 2004). There are no telephone lines or running water in this village. Almost all the children are Zapotec Indians and speak Spanish. Many of their parents do not read or write. There were six classrooms and six teachers. The school day was from 8:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. with a 30-minute recess at 10:30 a.m. for breakfast. Most of my days were spent with the 14 students and their teacher in the sixth grade classroom, though I also observed in Grades 1 and 4.

Urban School

I followed my rural school observations with one month of observations in the afternoon session of an urban primary school located in one of the oldest barrios in Oaxaca City. Most public primary schools in Oaxaca have two sessions: *matutino* (morning) and *vespertino* (afternoon), with significant differences in cost and quality of education between the two sessions.

Afternoon school starts at 2:00 p.m. and ends at 6:30 p.m., with a 30-minute recess at 4:00 p.m. This *vespertino* session had 21 students in the sixth grade, 242 students and 12 teachers in the school. A significant difference between urban and rural schools is that all the teachers in urban schools have a second job in the mornings—teaching in other schools, driving taxicabs, or working in businesses.

Participants

I worked primarily with two teachers and their 35 sixth-grade students, though I interviewed 10 teachers and observed 4 (Grades 1, 4, and 6 in the rural school, and Grade 6 in the urban school). The urban teacher, Elena, had 26 years of teaching experience, all in Oaxaca urban schools. She has taught sixth grade for 14 years. During this study, she taught fourth grade in a private school in the morning, traveling to this school to teach sixth grade in the afternoon. The rural teacher, Sandra, had 7 years of teaching experience; this is her first year in sixth grade.

Data Collection

I observed, interviewed, and collected documents over a 5-month period. During these 30 separate observations, I used a tape recorder and camera, and made observation notes. I transcribed most of the audiotapes (in Spanish) to verify my notes with the participants with the help of two bilingual research assistants. I was able to speak informally with the teachers and students every day, asking them to elaborate on what they were doing. In the rural school, I observed the sixth-grade classroom for Spanish, mathematics, natural sciences, geography, history, and civics. In the urban school, I observed only Spanish classes. In addition, 10 teachers were interviewed and completed questionnaires about how they teach writing (see Appendix A). I used that information to conduct follow-up interviews with six teachers in the rural school and one teacher in the urban school. I was unable to interest other teachers in the urban school to participate in my study. I also interviewed and audiotaped all 14 sixth graders in the rural school about writing (Appendix B). In addition, I audiotaped five of those students outside of the classroom about their essays on legends, myths, and local knowledge. Finally, I collected and examined documents such as samples of student writing, textbooks, didactic materials given to the teachers by SEP, and sample examinations.²

Description of National Curriculum in Basic Education for Primary Grades

Educación básica PRIMARIA (Primary Basic Education): is the plan and programs of study with goals for language in Mexico that was adopted in 1993, and that culminated the late 1980s reform. This 1993, curriculum is

currently being revised (though the new curriculum has not been implemented). It lays out the foundations for the curriculum in Grades 1 through 9 in Mexico. In private schools and some urban public schools, basic textbooks are augmented with others. For example, in a Spanish class in a private school, there would be dozens of extra workbooks, a richer library of books for free reading, and a textbook that includes some computer literacy skills helpful for reading and writing. Although these materials are used in various ways, standardized examinations on each subject were issued every two months to ensure that the goals and objectives of this program were followed. While this seems similar in many ways to the accountability movement in the United States, there were significant differences. First, Mexican students were permitted as much time as they needed to complete an exam. Second, the overall emphasis in the classroom was not on testing but on learning the material. Teachers could give the standardized exams when they felt the students were ready, thus the weeks when students took exams could vary from school to school or even from classroom to classroom within a school.

There are four stated purposes of the Spanish curriculum: (a) tight integration between content and activities, (b) freedom for teachers to choose techniques and methods to teach reading and writing, (c) recognition of previous life experiences of the children in oral and written language, and (d) fostering the development of competencies in the use of language in all school activities (SEP, 1993, pp. 22–23).

The organization of the program in Spanish is divided into four strands: spoken, written, recreational, and reflection about language. In primary schools, each Grade (1 to 6) has a list of knowledge, abilities, activities, and communication situations for these four strands (SEP, 1993, pp. 42–44). Table 1 represents the objectives or tasks for the Spanish curriculum in sixth grade as well as the four strands in which these objectives are realized. Table 1 is a comparison of the implementation of these objectives in the urban and rural schools.

At first glance, it looks as though the schools are similar in the tasks of the national curriculum they practice. However, they are most similar in what they don't practice: debating, interviewing, logical deductions between ideas in their writing, comparison between oral language and note taking, analysis of diverse variants of Spanish, and amplification of vocabulary. There was a striking difference between the two schools. The rural school focused on the breadth of the curriculum, covering more content in less time while the urban school stressed depth, spending more time mining a few lessons. In other words, there was more repetition and time spent on parts of the writing process like finding an idea, writing essays, revising and correcting texts in the urban school. The rural school went more superficially over the curriculum, rarely pausing to take time to revise or inquire more deeply into thinking, writing, and reading tasks.

Table 1

Comparison of SEP's Educación Básica and Implementation in Rural and Urban Schools.

EDUCACIÓN BÁSICA – SEXTO GRADO (Basic Education – Sixth Grade)	Rural	Urban
Spoken language		
Plan oral presentations with visual aids	A	B
Practice debate and interviewing	D	D
Use appropriate vocabulary for different situations	C	A
Written language (includes reading and writing)		
Identify main ideas	A	A
Write formal texts with introductions, bodies, conclusions	C	A
Deduce a logical structure in paragraphs with appropriate relations between main ideas and supporting ideas	D	D
Revise and correct texts	C	A
Elaborate and synthesize texts	D	B
Compare techniques between oral language and note taking	D	D
Use dictionaries, encyclopedias, newspapers, textbooks in their writing	A	A
Use the library	C	D
Demonstrate knowledge of accents and spelling	B	B
Recreational literature		
Describe narrative texts, traditions, popular fiestas of the community and compile an anthology	B	B
Elaborate and write about artistic events and cultural events in the school	C	C
Reflection about language		
Analyse diverse variants of Spanish	D	D
Understand verb tenses, especially the difference between the preterite and copreterite (two past tenses in Spanish)	B	C
Amplify their vocabulary	D	D
Use conjunctions and prepositions	C	C

Note. From SEP (1993) and classroom observations by this investigator.

A = every week; B = nearly every week (no more than 1 or 2 times not observed within the week); C = irregular (missed 3 or more weeks in a month); D = never observed

Furthermore, a few more points need elaboration based on my observations in both schools. There was no instruction on choosing words or shaping sentences for a particular audience or subject. Using appropriate vocabulary for different situations, for example, merely meant repeating words from textbooks for that report. Students were not instructed on how to choose language appropriate for one subject or another, nor on how to shape language. They did not discuss how different situations might call for different vocabulary. As for true revisions (vs. mere corrections), I did not observe in the classrooms much elaboration or synthesis of texts or true reconceptualization of an idea. Without resources such as overhead projectors and transparencies, it was difficult to have a workshop on writing. For example, the urban teacher had to copy the entire essay on the whiteboard while the students talked and fooled around, and the rural teacher never arranged workshops at all. Though students wrote frequently, they merely copied words from the textbooks or from each other. They rarely used outside sources (the libraries are quite poor). In sum, students were left to their own devices when it came to paper revision, logic analysis, vocabulary building, and word choice.

Discussion and Interpretation

A summary of the major findings based on observations, interviews, and audiotapes in these two schools is presented. Tensions between western influences and the local cultures, the use of written language in the Mexican schools without consideration of purpose or audience, and the role of reading, writing, and oral expression in the schools and broader culture are discussed. Finally, implications for U.S. educators who teach immigrant students from Mexico are outlined.

La Llorona, Colonialism, and Western Influences

Alexander (2001) wrote that to understand “anything about education elsewhere one’s perspective should be powerfully informed by history” (p. 511). Indeed, some historians claim that the failure of a widespread reverence for literacy in Mexico began more than 500 years ago when the colonizers of Mexico came from Spain, one of the “least literate societies of Western Europe” (Coatsworth, 2000, p. 335). In pre-Conquest Mexico, the indigenous culture was predominantly an oral culture. Gruzinski (1993) reported that these early indigenous cultures took “great pains to cultivate oral traditions and to codify, verify, and transmit them” (p. 9). In the post-Conquest era, writing became the “instrument of assimilation” by the Spanish, though it never progressed enough to “stifle oral expression” (pp. 55–56).

Early indigenous cultures produced sophisticated and highly stylized pictographs. The ordering of the signs and glyphs were as significant as words strung on a line of text (Gruzinski, 1993). The Spanish colonizers misread

these early texts as merely decorative and erroneously called them “paintings” (p. 12). Thus began the rupture between the communicative value of the pictograph and its artistic merit.

By the time of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, barely a quarter of the school-age population went to primary school and less than 5% reached secondary (Coatsworth, 2000). The big transition into literacy occurred between 1920 and 1960, when José Vasconcelos was the Secretary of Public Education. The national emphasis on literacy education grew, however, the national averages disguise problems in states such as Oaxaca and Chiapas, where literacy rates and years of education lag far behind the rest of the country. Indeed, the gap in literacy between the North and the South of Mexico is widening today (Joseph & Henderson, 2002a). Factors which contribute to the cultural and linguistic isolation and low literacy rates in Southern Mexico derive from multiple indigenous languages and few necessary resources in these languages, few teachers qualified or willing to teach in remote parts of the state, inadequate housing for these teachers, inaccessible roads and poor bus service.

In Southern Mexico, the indigenous influence remains strong. As I talked to the children in these schools and read their writing, observed their classrooms, and visited their teachers, I realized that these ancient beliefs and customs are, in the words of Paz (1985) “still in existence beneath Western forms. These still-living remains testify to the vitality of the pre-Cortesian culture” (p. 89), what has been called the old deep Mexico, or *México profundo* (Bonfil, 1996).

Evidence of teaching the writing process (prewriting, drafting, peer workshops, revising, and editing) was never observed in the rural school. The teacher in the urban school had more professional development opportunities and did encourage her students to complete parts of the writing process. However, neither teacher encouraged revision and multiple drafts. There was little sense of reviewing the paper to add or change content, or more importantly, no sense of why that would matter. Form predominated over content most of the time. More importantly, when children were assigned to write on any *subject* other than recreational literature (i.e., legends, myths, folklore) or in any *genre* other than narrative, they copied words out of the books.

In interviews with the children (see Appendix B), they did not see much value of writing in their daily lives. Their answers were facile as all agreed it was important, yet only one student could elaborate as to why writing matters—to help people write letters without going to the market and paying the *señora* (married woman or Mrs.). The teachers’ ideas about what constitutes good writing were more concrete than the students’ views, but they were concerned less with content and practical applications than with aesthetics and calligraphy. In the questionnaires the teachers filled out (see

Appendix A), they talked about how they corrected students' writing and made writing good. All the teachers felt correcting errors (especially spelling, grammar, and punctuation) were most important. Next was handwriting, as one teacher wrote, "improving their strokes." In short, what they valued above all else in good writing was spelling, followed by correctness, a developed theme, uniformity of letters, a legible rewrite of the draft, and correct grammatical expression.

Although multiple genres in writing were practiced in schools, it was in the narrative genre that the pre-Cortesian mythic memories came to life. One of the writing assignments in the sixth grade required students to write about legends that they knew and loved. This opened up—more so in the rural than the urban school—a flood of stories about ancient people buried beneath the floors, *diablos* (devils), black cats, cursed tigers, hairy hands disconnected from bodies, *Minotaurs* (a creature in Greek mythology that is half sacred bull, half man), men who visit hell or try to kill the devil, skulls that haunt, *muertos* (dead people) who come back to haunt us, *mala mujeres* (bad women), and of course, *La Llorona*. In fact, it was when the children used narrative genres to write legends that I observed the only examples of original writing.

The legend of *La Llorona* can be traced back to pre-Conquest Mexico. It always involves a mother who has somehow participated in the death of her children. She must roam the world weeping for her children. There are many transformations and adjustments to this version of the myth in oral traditions in Mexico, the U.S. Southwest, and Europe. In ancient Greece, the goddess Demeter loses her daughter Persephone to the underworld, causing winter to descend on the Earth. In the Bible, it is Rachel who is inconsolable because of losing her children. And in Mexico, the story overlaps with the Aztec earth-creation goddess Chihuacoatl, and *La Malinche*, a proper name stemming from Malinalli, the "native woman said to be the translator and lover to Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés" (Figueredo, 2004, p. 234). She is said to be the ghost of doña (madam) Marina who was considered a traitor to her race for translating for Cortés, for becoming his lover, and for giving birth to modern Mexico (for good or for bad) (Figueredo).

There have been countless analyses of the psychology of this legend. Paz (1985) attributes the role of *La Llorona* to Mexican suspicions of foreignness and femininity. Others claim that the problem always stems from a woman entering into a relationship with someone of another race or class. The betrayal of Mexico by a woman during the Conquest is also present. Finally, the notion of motherhood is "mixed with sorrow and suffering . . . a measure of guilt and fear" (Figueredo, 2004, p. 234). The archetypal analysis deemed this legend as having touched "fundamental questions about human existence" (p. 239). The legend is disturbing because the story stops "at a terrifying point" for the reader (p. 240). The wailing mother finds no solace, the mother-child bond has been severed, and her resultant pain is far worse

than the original wound. Thus she continues to look for her children. It is this archetypal core of the story that makes it survive in the imaginations of people today in Mexico.

For the rural children in Mexico, *La Llorona* was a classic example of how the oral tradition flourishes. I found that these children loved talking about their self-engendered phantasms that are real to them. As the children talked, it became obvious that this phantasmagoric reality was as much within them as outside of them. As Malraux (1970) said,

No civilization—and certainly no barbarism—is strong enough to tear away from men the myths that are their most ancient strength. Barbarism sacrifices men to the myths, while we desire a civilization that places myths in the service of men. (p. 198)

Every child I interviewed in the rural school believed that some parts of legends were true because they had been told these stories by family members—*abuelos* (grandparents), *tíos* (aunts and uncles), and *padres* (parents). *La Llorona*, a favorite story believed by all, was told with varying details from child to child: María hears things like a baby crying in the field and a woman who shouts; Patricia says *La Llorona* could be a wife whose husband killed the children because he saw her with someone else; Hugo does not believe she is crying but rather shouting, “Where are my children?” Sergio says *La Llorona* has appeared to his *abuelita* (grandmother) but she had a cross and scared *La Llorona* away; and José, whose *abuelita* (grandmother) is a catechist, told him that *La Llorona* is connected to the biblical King Herod who upon ordering the children killed, incited a *señora* (Mrs. or married woman) who did not want them killed.

Two students wrote about *La Llorona*. Catrina wrote of a girl who partied too much, got pregnant because she “sought the counsel of liquor” and in one drunken rage, killed her children. God sent her back to earth to look for her sons and to suffer, even though they were safely in heaven. Mercedes, on the other hand, wrote of a young wife whose husband left her for another woman. There were lots of details of fights, beatings, and she finally murdered her children before *La Llorona* went to heaven and learned she could not enter the kingdom of heaven because of her crimes. God would forgive her, however, if she spent time in the rivers and streets shouting, “Where are my children?”

La Llorona demonstrates how the oral tradition works: Certain legends are constantly rewritten but their archetypal features remain intact. A woman roams the world, looking for her children who have died because of her actions. The notion of mothers doomed to suffer is constant in all the stories. The idea of salvation and entrance into heaven despite some sinful stains on one’s soul is a core theme in almost all versions of the legend. Whether from alcohol, infidelity, or sin and damnation, the lessons are cultural warnings, modernized or adapted for each child’s world.

Three things emerged from this assignment on legends. First, the children were more animated, passionate, articulate and capable of amplification when they could *talk* about these legends and myths rather than write about them. *Writing* about the legends was often stale and robotic, though writing about legends was no less precious to them. They seemed to lack the skills necessary to convey in writing the same passion they conveyed in talking about their legends. Nonetheless, they loved their written narratives about these legends. What mattered in this genre was the passion behind the content, something I never saw in other written genres. Second, the notion of ownership of words and ideas was minimal in the written essays. Rather, the frequent borrowing of others' words seemed normal and practical (more so in reports than in narratives). Typically, they drew no distinctions between writing their own version of a legend or copying it from a book—*La Llorona* being one exception. Finally, the assignment as written in the textbook stressed some prewriting activities and included drafting, conferencing, and editing. Theoretically, this is typical to what an assignment in the United States would entail. In reality, the Mexican children wrote a draft that they showed to the teacher who only corrected penmanship, spelling, and grammar. Some of the children then recopied their original paper, only changing the corrections of the teacher. What they did do was to produce an attractive manuscript with drawings that were as important as the story or in some cases they *were* the story. They all spent more time copying their words neatly and drawing their pictures than they did on the act of composing the words. Nor was there any attention to content in either the written or oral *questions* from peers or the teacher. Yet it was obvious that the amount of information the children had from family lore was substantially more than what appeared in their written stories. Outside the formal objectives of the curriculum, legends came alive. Inside the parameters of the prescribed curriculum, they were often copied.

The *Educación Básica* (SEP, 1993) conveys a national attitude about language in Mexico that is similar to theories about language curriculum in the United States. In Mexico, this overconcern with form dominates all other aspects of language use. Even in the urban school where the teacher tried to use current educational theories about writers' workshop, process writing, etc., students clung to powerful views about what constitutes good writing (i.e., appearance, correctness, a drawing or picture). These are the notions of literacy that interpenetrate daily with the national curriculum: a high value on the aesthetics of a text, a stronger focus on conventions or mechanics (grammar, spelling, punctuation) of writing than on content, a connection of aesthetics to communicative value, a familiarity and passion for some genres over others (narrative more than reports), and a higher skill in oral rather than written literacy tasks.

On the one hand, a tradition of colonial and neocolonial linguistic domination prevails in Mexican schools as evidenced by the overemphasis on *ortografía* (spelling) and *caligrafía* (penmanship). The emphases on the

form and aesthetics, the “scribal” aspects of a text (Smith et al., 2003), come not only from colonial and neocolonial domination, but also from a tradition of indigenous writing that could be traced back to the pre-Conquest era (King, 1994). There was certainly an ability to write original content if the *genre* was the one that was valued. Finally, this focus on form, sometimes to the exclusion of all else, or form divorced from context may be related to Gruzinski’s (1993) documentation of the post-Cortesian efforts to decontextualize early pictographs from their contexts and even to the low level of literacy of 15th-century Spain. After all, if the conquerors were not too literate themselves, as Coatsworth (2000) argues, they may have treated texts as art objects, admired them as objects of aesthetic pleasure but not as something that one touches, changes, or interacts with—and surely not something with communicative value. Yet the dynamic and indigenous oral tradition obvious in the legends the children talked about and believed in were rarely formal parts of the classrooms.

Literacy and the Rhetorical Triangle

Contemporary theory about the teaching of writing in the United States stresses that writing programs need to be based on rhetorical concerns; that is, they should be organized around different purposes and for different audiences. The rhetorical triangle assumes that every piece of writing has a subject, a writer, and an audience. What writers know and what the audience knows becomes central to how we shape our message. Children need to write for real purposes and for real audiences. As Aristotle made clear, writing is a means-end analysis. People would not describe the art of cooking *mole* (a Oaxacan delicacy) the same way for fourth graders as for a national television program on regional food. What I observed in the classrooms in Mexico, however, suggests that the children had little sense of the real purposes and audiences for writing, perhaps because writing (in school and out of school) had little relationship to their lives.

One example worth sharing came from the rural school. It is about a bulletin board the second grade teacher and students were responsible for during the time I observed. This board was outside the director’s classroom and organized by different classes during the year. *El Primogenito del 2004* (the beginning of 2004), contained sections on information (newspaper clippings about local news), jokes, sports, poetry, an editorial on historical figures, and drawings by children about hygiene and health. Of the 60 pieces of writing on this bulletin board, only 11 pieces were submitted by children and all were copied. The jokes, for example, were copied from a school anthology. Only the hygiene and health section had small posters with sayings (6 to 10 words) that demonstrated original work by the students in the school.

Formal oral expression was the most meaningful form of communication in the curriculum. Here the teachers were encouraged to use teams to work on each subject and then to make oral presentations. This was, by far, the major

form of demonstrating learning in these schools, far more prevalent than writing or reading. Typically, in the rural school, students would work in small groups to prepare posters about a subject, working diligently to draw pictures and write key ideas on the posters. Next they would stand up in front of their classmates and orally exhibit their knowledge.

These sixth-grade exhibitions were mixed in quality. First, in the vast majority of the exhibitions—the genre of reports—the students copied words directly from the textbook. When they stood up to give their presentations, they read from their *láminas* or posters. At the end of the exhibitions, the teacher asked if I had questions. I began asking content-related questions to see if they could amplify on the material, with mixed results. Second, many of the students did not make eye contact with their classmates, and the other students in the class were observed talking and working and even asking the teacher questions during the presentation. Thus the notion of audience, even with oral presentations, was not real for these children. Sometimes, the other students brought work to be corrected by the teacher *during* an oral presentation as the presenters continued, oblivious to the distractions, further reducing the notion that it is necessary for anyone to actually hear or listen to what one says. Occasionally, absolutely no one was listening, including members of the student's own group. Finally, there was a sense of verbal performance as art as the students presented orally. They adopted nonconversational tones of voice, reciting information in different registers as if they intuitively realized this type of language use was different from other uses of language. They were speaking to a public audience (their classmates and teacher), even if no one was listening.

Informal oral language was the only time I observed that students were acutely aware of audience. As in any person-to-person communication, students were shaping discourse for their intended audience. When children talked to each other in small groups in the classroom or on the playground, oral language took on its true communicative values. Also, when students were being interviewed outside of the classroom, they were vitally aware of getting their points across. So while language use had a formalness in the classroom—when giving an oral presentation, writing, or reading aloud—it also had an eerie disconnect to the notion that people speak, write, and read for specific reasons and expect an audience to pay attention to their words. When students were working in small groups, talking to each other in meaningful ways, the teacher would often come and talk to me. Though I audiotaped these conversations, the noise level was so high in the classroom that I could barely hear the interview. In both schools, the teachers neither noticed nor minded the laughing and shouting of the students.

There were two exceptions to this less than purposeful use of language. First, I interviewed the rural students outside of the classroom about their essays on legends, myths, and local lore after reading short essays and

narratives they had written. Here the students came to life speaking animatedly, interrupting each other, telling story after story with pride, creativity, and imagination. No matter what type of legend I asked about—bad women, witches, ghosts in the cemetery—each child had versions and stories about his or her family and personal encounters with the supernatural. Once these children realized I was interested in these stories, they began bringing photographs to class to share with me family altars to the dead, ceremonies to heal or to rid homes of evil spirits, advice on where to buy herbs for healing. One student even took me outside to point to an old woman walking down the road. He said that she was a well-known *bruja* (witch). These students had a very different sense of literacy and of story *outside* school versus *inside* school.

Second, in the rural school, the sixth-grade students wrote a play about *muertos* (dead people) and ghosts. I saw the indigenous character of Mexico in this play—superstition and magical beliefs that varied from *brujas* (witches) to *curanderas* (healers) to *muertos* (dead people). Here I saw glee as the children contemplated horror and a diminished sense of death. They wrote a script, created elaborate costumes from home, and rigged up a rope and sheet across half of the classroom for a curtain. The children were enjoying themselves, laughing heartily at their little jokes and at the lines delivered by class comedians. They were writing to perform, confident of their material, and genuinely assured of an audience. As such, there was a lively sense of shaping discourse that mattered to them, their peers, and the audience.

On both of these occasions, the principles of orality—that the possibility for turn-taking exists, that students can interrupt each other and initiate topics—changed the dynamics entirely. Here the use of school language was truly rhetorical with a strong sense of communicating for real purposes to a real audience (Cazden, 1988). While the topic of dead people filled with blood and gore surely appealed to sixth-graders, it was perhaps the genre, a play, that was the root of its popularity. After all, plays and puppetries are indigenous forms, while reports are not. Students had a natural attraction to this genre in schools.

Finding the Interstices: Implications for United States Teachers

Focusing on language in the comparison of the education of Mexico and the United States was useful since, as Alexander (2001) noted, language is a tool and means of human learning and an expression of culture and identity. The study of language “starts with accounts of primary education in a country and notices emergence of core and abiding values, traditions and habits which shape, enable, and constrain pedagogical development” (p. 511). In a history of education in Mexico, Vaughn (1982) has written that primary schools in

Mexico unify the nation culturally and inculcate “modern” habits and desires. This assumes, however, that there is a real world connection between what is taught in primary school and the intimate cultures of the children. Issues surrounding literacy beliefs that emerged from this study might be of help to U.S. educators.

First, students from Southern Mexico may hold strong beliefs in the legends and myths of their culture. To these students, these are not mere stories, but are as real and concrete as trees, houses, and cars. It would benefit teachers in the United States to allow these students to talk, write, and read about their indigenous beliefs, thereby validating their personal beliefs: *La Llorona* is not a story, it is real. Second, students from Mexico should be given opportunities to express orally what they know by making connections between oral and written language frequently. Every student I observed was more articulate, sometimes stunningly so, with oral language than written. Third, it would be helpful for U.S. teachers to realize that borrowing words from others might have different values in other cultures. It does not mean that U.S. educators should condone plagiarism, but that they should more gently educate Mexican immigrant students about western notions of ownership and borrowed words and ideas. Fourth, some genres are more valued in Mexico than others. Narrative and expressive writing are far more important than research and report writing. And finally, producing attractive texts (and its related preoccupation with form over content) is highly valued in Mexican education and culture. Recopying texts with neat penmanship, correct spelling and grammar, and little drawings or *dibujos* are part of the notion of what makes good writing. These are students who for homework might copy one sentence 50 times in a penmanship notebook, considering that to be a valuable use of time. Drawing elaborate pictures to accompany an essay or spending far more time on the art than the writing in order to present a visually attractive product is highly valued. U.S. educators need to understand and allow students opportunities to create such texts while easing them into the U.S. values about the importance of original content.

Conclusion

In these Mexican schools, through the writing and speaking of sixth-grade students, I found the magic of local legends and the oral tradition of the *abuelas* (grandmothers) to be a significant part of the curriculum. When I was interviewing the rural students about legends, I asked them what they wanted U.S. educators to know about them. They sent this message to their neighbors *al norte* (the north): Listen to our stories. They matter to us. This is our blood, our language, our people.

Banks (2004) has argued that “citizens in a diverse democratic society should be able to maintain attachments to their cultural communities as well as participate effectively in the shared national culture” (p. 298). Indeed, strong

positive and clarified cultural identifications and attachments are prerequisites for influencing students' beliefs and behaviors.

Lo mexicano or the Mexican way is really many Mexican ways. There is no single way of depicting the Mexican character, though there has been a preoccupation with defining what it means to be Mexican for decades (Joseph & Henderson, 2002b). Nor will there be one Mexico when conducting ethnography with students and teachers in Mexico. What remains from this study are dominant impressions about the worldview of these children from Oaxaca. As Poniatowski (2001) writes, Mexico is about the "painful, dark, and deep history of those who have nothing, and are still able to create their own idols, the myths of their culture, the saints of their devotion" (p. xi). These myths and legends like *La Llorona* are ways of viewing the world and appear in all their acts, opening the doors for communion. While the Mexican national curriculum pushes hard to write correctly and to write for different purposes to real audiences, the *real* purposes of language for these students were the use of imagination to invent cultural worlds. These were the forms through which these students made sense of their lives; here was where the ancient and modern resided side by side. They can teach us, U.S. educators and other concerned parties, that from the height of our generalizations, we can be brought to the level of a living, breathing, dynamic oral tradition, one that we would be wise to pay attention to.

References

- Alexander, R. (2001). Border crossings: Towards a comparative pedagogy. *Comparative Education*, 37(4), 507–523.
- Banks, J. (2004). Teaching for social justice, diversity, and citizenship in a global world. *The Educational Forum*, 68(4), 296–305.
- Bonfil, B. G. (1996). *México profundo: Reclaiming a civilization*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Campbell, J. R., Hombo, C. M., & Mazzeo, J. (2000). *NAEP 1999 Trends in Academic Progress: Three Decades of Student Performance* (CES 2000-469). Washington, DC: Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics.
- Cazden, C. B. (1988). *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- CLNet. (2003). *Types of Latin America origin immigrants*. Retrieved July 7, 2004, from <http://clnet.ucla.edu/challenge/origin.htm>

- Coatsworth, J. H. (2000). Commentary: Education and Indian peoples in Mexico. In F. Reimers (Ed.), *Unequal schools, unequal chances: The challenges to equal opportunity in the Americas* (pp. 335–338). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies.
- Figueredo, M. L. (2004). The legend of *La Llorona*: Excavating and (re)interpreting the archetype of the creative/fertile feminine force. In I. M. F. Blayer & M. C. Anderson (Eds.), *Latin American narratives and cultural identity: Selected readings* (pp. 232–243). New York: Peter Lang.
- Gruzinski, S. (1993). *The Conquest of Mexico: The incorporation of Indian societies into the western world, 16th–18th centuries*. (E. Corrigan Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. (Original work published in 1988).
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática. (2006). *El INEGI en Su Entidad Oaxaca* (Oaxaca part of statistics). Retrieved July 24, 2006, from <http://www.inegi.gob.mx/inegi/default.asp?c=&e=20>
- Izquierdo, C. M., & Sánchez, R. A. (2000). Function and evaluation of a compensatory program directed at the poorest Mexican states: Chiapas, Guerrero, Hidalgo, and Oaxaca. In F. Reimers (Ed.), *Unequal schools, unequal chances: The challenges to equal opportunity in the Americas* (pp. 341–373). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies.
- Jiménez, R. T., Smith, P. H., & Martínez-León, N. (2003). Freedom and form: The language and literacy practices of two Mexican schools. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 38, 488–508.
- Joseph, G. M., & Henderson, T. J. (2002a). Introduction. In G.M. Josephs & T. J. Henderson (Eds.), *The Mexico reader: History, culture, politics* (pp. 1–8). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Joseph, G. M., & Henderson, T. J. (2002b). The search for “Lo Mexicano.” In G.M. Josephs & T.J. Henderson (Eds.), *The Mexico reader: History, culture, politics* (pp. 9–10). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- King, L. (1994). *Roots of identity: Language and literacy in Mexico*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Levinson, B. A. (1996). Social differences and schooled identity at a Mexican *Secundaria*. In B. A. Levinson, D. E. Foley, & D. C. Holland (Eds.), *The cultural production of the educated person: Critical ethnographies of schooling and local practice* (pp.211–238). New York: SUNY Press.
- Levinson, B. A., & Holland, D. C. (1996). The cultural production of the educated person: An introduction. In B. A. Levinson, D. E. Foley, & D.C. Holland (Eds.), *The cultural production of the educated person: Critical ethnographies of schooling and local practice* (pp. 1–54). New York: SUNY Press.

- Malraux, A. (1970). Excerpt from speech to Congress in Russia, 1935. In R. Payne (Ed.), *A portrait of André Malraux*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- McCarthy, S. J., García, G. E., López-Velásquez, A. M., Lin, S., & Guo, Y. H. (2004). Understanding writing contexts for English language learners. *Research in the Teaching of English* 38, 351–394.
- Moll, L. C. (1990). Social and instructional issues in literacy instruction for “disadvantaged” students. In M. S. Knapp & P. M. Shields (Eds.), *Better schooling for the children of poverty: Alternatives to conventional wisdom* (pp. 61–84). Berkeley, CA: McCutchan.
- Nieto, S. (2002). *Language, culture, and teaching: Critical perspectives for a new century*. Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum.
- No Child Left Behind Act. Pub. L. No. 107–110 (2002).
- Paz, O. (1985). *The labyrinth of solitude and other writings* (L. Kemp, Y. Milos, & R.P. Belash Trans.). New York: Grove Press. (Original work published in 1961).
- Poniatowski, E. (2001). Foreword: Taking Mexican popular culture by storm. In G. Joseph, A. Rubenstein, E. Zolov (Eds.), *Fragments of a golden age: The politics of culture in Mexico since 1940* (pp. xi–xiv). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- SIPaz. (2002, January 4). *Facts about Chiapas*. Retrieved July 24, 2006, from http://www.sipaz.org/data/chis_en_02.htm
- Schell, P.A. (2003). *Church and state education in revolutionary Mexico City*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.
- Secretaría de Educación Pública. (1993). *Educación básica PRIMARIA: Plan y programas de estudio 1993* (Primary basic education: Plan and programs of study). Mexico, DF: Author
- Smith, P. H., Jiménez, R. T., & Martínez-León, N. (2003). Other countries literacies: What U.S. educators can learn from Mexican schools. *The Reading Teacher* 56, 772–781.
- Vaughn, M. K. (1982). *The state, education, and social class in Mexico, 1880–1928*. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press.
- Zabin, C., Kearney, M., García, A., Runsten, D., & Nagengast, C. (2004). *Mixtec migrants in California agriculture: A new cycle of poverty* (Publication No. 009). Retrieved July 7, 2004, from California Institute for Rural Studies Web site: <http://www.cirsinc.org/pub/mixtec.html>

Endnotes

¹ English-only issues became more political in the 1980s with various movements in the U.S. Congress to declare English the nation's official language. While stemming from multiple reasons ranging from fear, anxiety, bigotry to linguistic naiveté, California passed Proposition 227 in 1998, requiring the state to terminate bilingual education and replace it with English immersion. In 2000, Arizona passed a similar Proposition 203, effectively making it difficult to offer bilingual education and setting time limits for state funds to be spent making students proficient in English.

² Though I observed all 14 students in 6th grade in the rural school, and 21 students in 6th grade in the urban school, I was unable to obtain release forms from the parents of all the urban school students. Therefore only 12 students from the urban school gave permission to use their writing, have their photos taken, etc. I also obtained permission to use the writing of 3 students in the 4th grade in the rural school. In total, I was able to use the writing, materials, and photos of 29 students.

Appendix A

Questionnaire on Teaching Writing

1. What grades and subjects do you teach?
2. How long have you been teaching?
3. Where did you receive your teaching degree? When?
4. How often do you assign writing to your students?
5. How do your students choose topics for their writing? Describe some of the topics they write about.
6. Who are the audiences the students write for?
7. What are some of the different purposes for writing in your classroom?
8. How long are the students' essays (number of words, typically)?
9. Do the students revise? How often are the essays revised?
10. When students revise, what kinds of things do they change in their essays?
11. Do the students arrange themselves in workshops and share their papers with their peers? How do you organize that?
12. When you assess the papers, what kinds of things do you comment on?
13. What is the most important feature of good writing in your view?
14. How would you describe your philosophy of teaching writing?
15. How do you continue to learn new ways of teaching writing?
16. Describe the best professional development program you've attended since you started teaching.

Appendix B

Questions for Students

1. Do you like to read?
2. What kinds of books, stories, magazines, newspapers, etc. do you like to read?
3. Do you read in your house?
4. Do you read only in school?
5. Do you like to write?
6. What kinds of subjects and themes are your favorites when you write?
7. Where do you get your ideas?
8. What is the most difficult part about writing?
9. What is the easiest part about writing?
10. Do you think writing is important?
11. If yes, why?
12. Do you want to be a writer when you finish school?