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Learning to Write in a Mexican School

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This study documented the writing practices of students in a Mexican elementary school and identified participants' attitudes toward different forms of writing. Data included observations in two classrooms as well as interviews with six case-study children and their parents. Results revealed copious writing in the school including dictations, copying, and simple texts. The teachers seldom integrated home or community texts into classroom instruction. Participants indicated that writing was a "skill" to be learned and practiced exclusively at school. Shared, ideologically motivated views of 'legitimate' writing were important factors in the invisibility of other forms of writing. The study concludes with recommendations for structuring writing instruction to better meet the needs of Mexican-origin students as well as ideas for future research.

Work on the literacies of Mexican-origin children suggests that both U.S. and Mexican educators often wrongly assume that these students and their families are uninterested in academic and prestige forms of literacy (for U.S. examples, see Davila de Silva, 1998; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Pugach, 1998; Tienda & Mitchell, 2006). In Mexico, several recent publications have called attention to the low number of books and newspapers read annually by Mexican citizens (Chávez Méndez, 2005; Delgado, 2005). Unfortunately, these problematic assumptions lend credence to a deficit perspective, namely the belief that Mexican-background learners are in

some way culturally or even cognitively inferior to other students. In addition to negative effects on children (Wolfram, Adger & Christian, 1999), essentializing laments about the low literacy of Mexican households may make it less likely that practitioners and researchers will take steps to understand the local socio-cultural contexts that shape the literacies practiced in schools, homes, and communities throughout Mexico as well as in Mexican immigrant families living in the U.S. and Canada.

A social practice perspective on literacy (Barton, 1994; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000) claims that reading and writing practices are best understood within specific historical, social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. In other words, it is not enough to view literacy only in terms of the individual. Despite efforts to bring current research on the literacies of non-English-speaking children to an international readership, access to published research on literacy and literacy instruction in Latin America remains relatively limited (Seda-Santana, 2000). One consequence of these conditions is that findings from studies carried out in the United States and Europe are frequently generalized to Latin American contexts (Author, 2003). Given the rapidly increasing numbers of transnational students in North American schools, there is a pressing need for empirical research on students' native literacies and the attitudes that underlie them.

Thus, one purpose of this study was to describe what parents, students, and teachers in a specific Mexican elementary school actually do with written language, as opposed to assumptions made in the absence of empirical evidence. A related purpose was to probe participants' implicit and/or explicit attitudes toward these different forms of literacy. By documenting and analyzing such views we go beyond a perceived deficit view and in the process demonstrate how local contextual factors work to influence actual practices. We focus here on the topic of writing; for description of a full range of local literacy practices see Author (2004). We hope that the findings of this study, based on original data collected in a central Mexican community, will be valuable both to Mexican teachers and to international educators who have Mexican students in their classrooms.

Literature Review

Social Practice Views of Writing.

This study was grounded in a social practice theory of literacy (Barton, 1994; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Theorists in this tradition argue that reading and writing are best understood through examination of localized "practices," which vary from place to place depending on specific contextual factors, including personal and collective attitudes and values (Barton & Hamilton, 2000), social identities (Gee, 1996), social structures and relationships (Bourdieu, 1991), as well as particular interests, needs, and experiences. In other words, literacy activities are not seen as static or universal, but rather as highly diverse in accordance with particular purposes and uses. Practice theorists pay particular attention to the dialectic power of written language as it mediates between everyday knowledge and the abstract, scientific concepts typically prized in schools.

Researchers working from practice perspectives contend that there is no single "literacy" learnable by all in the same way, but rather that there are "multiple literacies," each of which is socially, culturally, and politically embedded (Ivanič, 2004). They also tend to see literacy as inherently political or "ideological," given that acts of reading and writing are associated with certain interests and ideologies (Bourdieu, 1991; Fairclough, 2001; Street, 1984). In particular, they claim that, as a practice of schooling, literacy instruction cannot be analyzed apart from issues of power and racism, particularly as related to working-class learners (Moll, 2005).

Because dominant forms of written language often serve the interests of the dominant class (Freire, 1998; Lewis, 2001), the writing done by members of the working classes and cultural and linguistic minorities is commonly less visible and, when acknowledged at all, deemed deficient (Moll and Díaz, 1987).

Following these theoretical developments, a growing body of research on literacy instruction has sought explicit ways to link home and community literacy practices with pedagogies designed to promote the forms of reading and writing typically expected by schools (Guerra & Farr, 2002; McIntyre, Rosbery, & González, 2001). We argue that this connection is essential if students are to understand and begin to succeed given the literacy expectations and norms of the new, often strange, school environment. Taylor (1998), for instance, has highlighted the many paths by which African-American families become literate through daily interaction with members of their local social groups. She writes, “literacy is deeply embedded in the social processes of family life and is not some specific list of activities added to the family agenda” (pp. 92-93). When educators are familiar with home and community literacies, they can include them as resources in teaching school literacies.

Gunderson’s (2000) study showed that Asian immigrant students in Canada misunderstood teacher expectations and that they believed that curriculum content was too “difficult, complex and advanced” (p. 700) because their teachers did not identify the specific material they should copy or memorize as homework. The students believed that the teachers were failing to perform what they considered to be a teacher’s responsibility, based on their experience with academic expectations in their home countries. The miscommunication was based the students’ and teachers’ different expectations regarding the role of literacy in learning. Studies reported in González, Moll, & Amanti (2005) have shown how teachers can tap students’ experiences and prior knowledge to bridge practical, out-of-school knowledge with the more abstract knowledge evaluated in academic settings. Author (2001) documented the oral and written modalities of language produced in a dual-language school and Mexican-American barrio, including students’ stories, letters to relatives, and community advertisements used by teachers of Mexican- and non-Mexican-origin students as texts. Such studies point to the potential of culturally relevant pedagogies to engage working-class students and those of linguistically diverse backgrounds in meaningful literacy instruction.

Research on Literacy Development and Practices in Mexico.

More information concerning Mexican literacy practices could be useful for addressing seemingly intractable problems. One purpose of this study was to add to the knowledge base on Mexican literacies (Author, 2003; Author, 2008; Kalman, 2004; Miller, 2001). The most recent Mexican census reported that 11% of Mexican women and 7% of men were illiterate (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, 2001). It is significant that the Mexican census defines as “literate” anyone capable of reading or writing only a short note, suggesting that many more Mexicans have probably not developed other, more academic forms of literacy. Despite national efforts to provide for universal literacy, many Mexicans have yet to develop the forms of written linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) that would allow them access to higher education and better jobs.

Research on school-based writing development in Mexico reveals a strong emphasis on “form” over “meaning” (Carrasco Altamirano, 2003; De la Garza and Ruiz Ávila, 1994; Ferreiro, 1989; Author, 2003; Kimbrough, 2004; Author, 2005). For instance, teachers in Mexican schools

regulate strictly for elements of form, including spelling, placement of accent marks, punctuation, and handwriting, and writing typically consists of short, simple texts that are either copied or dictated. In contrast, the research shows fewer examples of students' own texts or writing done for contextualized, locally meaningful purposes (Ballesteros, 2003; Peredo Merlo, 2005; Weiss, 2000). These findings are important because they suggest that students are not being taught to use written language in ways valued in higher education, which includes an emphasis on writing that is original and critical.

These findings, taken from a range of socioeconomic contexts within Mexico, are also intriguing because they seem to contrast with findings from literacy research in U.S. schools in which "working-class children receive a reduced and intellectually inferior curriculum compared with their wealthier peers, as part and parcel of the stratification of schooling" (Moll, 2005, p. 276). That is, approaches to literacy education in Mexico seem to be relatively homogenous for children in wealthy and poor schools alike.

Research Questions

The social practice framework led us to investigate writing practices in context as well as the attitudes held by local parents, students, and teachers concerning different forms of literacy. The following research questions guided the study:

- What are the school writing practices?
- To what extent does the school integrate existing home and community writing practices into classroom instruction, if at all?
- What attitudes do teachers, students, and parents hold toward different types of writing?
- In what ways are the participants' attitudes similar and/or different?

Methodology

Setting. The study reported on here is part of a series of publications resulting from a long-term, collaborative research project. This work is unique in that it focuses both on writing practices and on attitudes toward different forms of writing in and out of school. We conducted this study in a medium-sized city in south central Mexico with a population of around 50,000. The history of this region reaches back over 2,000 years and includes the development of indigenous and non-alphabetic forms of writing developed well before the Spanish invasion and conquest (Author, 2008). This area is situated only a few miles from the state capital, which has approximately 2 million inhabitants. The community is home to a significant number of "transnationals," a population of (typically) Mexican males between the ages of 15 and 50 who emigrate back and forth between Mexico and the United States as a means to improve their employment opportunities and income. Likewise, agricultural work in the area has recently diminished due to population growth, new construction, and industrialization (Álvarez, Corro & Lorandi, 1992; Mlade, 2001). Lastly, this community is populated by a substantial number of indigenous peoples, including immigrants from southern states in Mexico.

At the time of the study, our focus school served students from kindergarten through twelfth grade, totaling around 360. The school was chosen in part for reasons of access, as the second author had been a literacy teacher at the school and had developed close contacts with the school's administrators and teachers. We also chose to conduct our research at this site because the students represented a broader range of socio-economic backgrounds than is common in Mexican schools. The public schools in this community serve working-class children while

private schools serve students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, an arrangement that is typical across the country (Levinson, 2000). At the time of the study, monthly tuition was 600 *pesos* (approximately 60 U.S. dollars), less than half the tuition at other private schools in the area.

Participants

Data were collected over a seven-month period during the 2003-2004 school year, primarily in the school's first-grade classroom as well as in one of two fourth-grade classrooms. We chose these particular levels because these are the grades in which Mexican children typically are first exposed to school-based writing (1st grade) and when they begin to write for academic purposes (4th grade). In other words, writing activities are normally prevalent at these two grade levels.

At the time of the study there were a total of 28 students in the first-grade classroom and 19 in the fourth, with relatively small class sizes (for Mexican schools) being one of the distinguishing features of the school. The fourth-grade classroom had fewer students than the first grade because there were two teachers for the fourth-grade student population as opposed to only one for that of the first grade. After three months of initial observation during which the researcher documented recurring school-based writing practices and individual students' class participation and writing behaviors, we chose to focus data collection on six case-study children, three from the first grade and three from the fourth. This selection was made based on our perceptions of students' literacy abilities (low, average, high) during classroom observations as well as on many informal conversations with the students about the reading and writing activities they were involved in at school. After we had formed impressions of individual students, we asked the teachers for their assessment. We chose this method of selecting the case-study students because we wished to make informed judgments about their abilities and also because we wished to avoid influencing teachers to label students and possibly biasing their instruction. Tables 1 and 2 below summarize information about the case-study participants.

Table 1: Case-Study Students

Age	Grade	Gender	Years at current school	Literacy abilities
6	first	female	6 months	high
6	first	female	4 (since preschool)	average
7	first	male	1	low
10	fourth	female	2	high
10	fourth	male	4	average
9	fourth	female	1	low

As can be seen in Table 1, the case-study children in the first grade were between ages 6 and 7, while those from the fourth grade were either 9 or 10. There were four female and two male case-study students. Students' length of attendance at the school ranged between six months and 4 years. All of the case-study students spoke Spanish as a home language, and

several had Náhuatl-speaking grandparents and older relatives, as is common in this community (Author, in press).

The mothers of the case-study children were also included in the study in order to gain a parental perspective on literacy and literacy instruction in the school and to complement our primary data collected in classrooms. We chose to work with mothers instead of fathers because the mothers usually accompanied the children to and from school and were more readily recruited as participants. Based on the second author's experience as a teacher and on our earlier fieldwork (Author, 2003) at the same school, we also knew that mothers frequently helped their children with homework and could therefore speak knowledgeably about their literacy experiences, interests, and abilities.

Table 2: Mothers

Age	Grade of Child	Occupation	Highest level of formal schooling	Years living in community	Husband's occupation
26	First	Homemaker	2-year beauty school	0.5	trailer operator
38	First	Homemaker	B.S. Chemistry	6	educational consultant
34	First	Sales agent	High school graduate	2	employee for automobile industry
33	Fourth	Homemaker	technical school (secretary)	11	veterinarian
33	Fourth	School monitor, Nurse	2-year technical school (nursing)	11	unemployed
32	Fourth	Homemaker	1 year of high school	1	sales representative

Table 2 provides an overview of information about the six mothers, including their levels of education, number of years living in the community, and husbands' professions. The mothers' aged ranged from 26 to 38. Four described themselves as homemakers, while two held steady jobs outside the home. Likewise, half had completed at least a two-year college degree. All were born in Mexico, and the number of years they had lived in the community ranged between six months and 11 years.

Research on school literacy achievement typically highlights the important role of family socioeconomic status (SES). While U.S.-based research typically calculates SES on the basis of participation in free or reduced federal lunch programs, such programs do not typically exist in public schools in Mexico. In keeping with Mexican norms and based on the parents' occupations and years of formal schooling, we determined that the case-study students were best described as middle class.

Other participants in this study included the two teachers of the focus classrooms. The first-grade teacher was a 27-year-old woman who completed a bachelor’s degree in elementary education at a state teacher’s college. After working one term at another local elementary school, she had been teaching at the research site for three years when the study began.

The fourth-grade teacher was a 37-year-old male who had completed a two-year teaching degree in elementary education from the same state teacher’s college. He had been working at the school for a total of 14 years, and before this he had worked for the Mexican Ministry of Education in the same state. At the time of the study he had recently begun teaching in the elementary school after many years of teaching science to middle-school students.

A note of contextualization may be useful as regards the differences in the focus teachers’ levels of professional preparation. Prior to 1992, teachers in Mexico were certified upon completion of a two-year *normalista* degree, such as that obtained by the fourth-grade teacher. Since 1992 new teachers have been required to complete a four-year teaching degree. We found that most of the more experienced teachers had fewer years of professional preparation at all of the elementary schools we studied in this community.

Table 3: Teachers

Position	Age	Gender	Professional Degree	Total years of teaching experience	Years teaching at current location
first-grade teacher	27	female	B.A. elementary education	3.5	3
fourth-grade teacher	37	male	A.A. elementary education	17	14

Data Collection

We collected qualitative data in the form of classroom observations, interviews, and artifacts. Our goal was to attain multiple vantage points from which to consider the forms, practices, and attitudes toward writing and written language. Over the course of the study we conducted formal observations in two classrooms on 40 separate occasions. Each observation lasted approximately 45 minutes. We also made many other informal visits during which we chatted with the teachers and arranged future observations and interviews.

The first author conducted one individual interview with the six case-study students, each of their mothers, and the two teachers. The parent and student interviews were carried out in family homes, while teachers were interviewed at school. Participants were asked if they enjoyed writing, about the types of writing they did most frequently, where they liked to write, and about their views of what constitutes good writing. They were also asked to talk about why they found writing (un)important. In order to gather the children’s views on writing without the simultaneous opinions of parents and/or siblings, the researcher obtained parental permission to interview each of the six children separately, typically following the parent interview in the family home. A native speaker of Spanish familiar with local schools transcribed the interviews. The first and second authors then spot-checked them for accuracy. The findings of the interview

sessions, each of which lasted about 45 minutes (30 for the children), allowed us to document, compare, and contrast the participants' attitudes toward different types of writing and writing instruction.

After the first round of interviews, a second session was organized with parents and teachers in order to pose follow-up questions. Three mothers came together for one of these meetings, and the first author interviewed the participating teachers together on another occasion. Each of these focus-group sessions lasted approximately 45 minutes. During these follow-up interviews the researcher asked the participants to elaborate on their earlier responses, such as why an emphasis on form in school literacy classes was important to them, and probed the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each other's ideas and opinions. It is worth pointing out that during these interview sessions all participants were outspoken and did not appear to be influencing each other's responses. Likewise, there were no contradictions as compared with data previously collected during the individual interviews.

In addition, the researchers had ongoing and frequent contact with most of the participants during the study given the proximity of the school to the university. For instance, short visits to chat with teachers and students and to observe school functions took place several times each week. We also examined formal and informal documents such as school posters and advertisements, student work, writing on the chalkboard, school rules and regulations, written messages, student drawings with text, letters, household books; and community signs, posters, and advertisements. The researcher collected copies of children's writing during every class visit, typically moving around the room and obtaining these samples from multiple students. Overall, more than 60 samples were collected. These documents were usually photographed using a digital camera or sketched in a notebook. This practice allowed us to compare and contrast the kinds of texts produced in each context and provided a basis for reflection and discussion of key aspects of writing during the interviews.

Analysis

We examined the data using the constant-comparative method (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Specifically, we began analyzing data early in the study and continued throughout the data collection phase. Focusing on repeated events, activities, and ideas in the data, we initially developed general categories, which we subsequently divided into more specific subcategories. For instance, the initial category "students' classroom writing" eventually yielded subcategories such as "copying written texts," "dictation," and "spelling." These categories and subcategories were revised, expanded, and condensed based on our consideration of additional data collected over the course of the study (e.g., further observations, interviews, and artifacts).

Practice theory (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Bourdieu, 1991) led us to compare our emerging categories and subcategories with those being developed by other researchers studying literacy development at elementary schools in the same community. We met weekly to discuss and interpret the findings of individual researchers. These discussions allowed us to establish the contextual validity of our data in part because the research group was bilingual and multicultural and also because members educated in Mexican schools and in U.S. schools offered different perspectives from which to interpret the data within this specific historical, social, cultural, economic, and political context. Likewise, the first author regularly spoke informally with the participating teachers before and after class to obtain their confirmation of tentative findings. For

example, the first author often spoke with the first-grade teacher about participating students, perceptions of their specific abilities, and their needs and difficulties, and the teacher would either confirm or disagree with these impressions based on her own experiences with and knowledge of the students and their families.

Writing Practices In and Out of School

The material conditions in which students were learning to write were similar to those found in public elementary schools in this region of Mexico. Each of the focal classrooms had unpainted brick walls and cement floors and included wooden tables at which students typically worked collaboratively on their assignments in groups of four or five. Each classroom also featured a chalkboard that spanned the front wall of the room, large glass windows on the sides, with a metal bookshelf and teacher's desk along the back wall. Each teacher had posted a number of texts in his/her classroom, for instance, the letters of the alphabet and the children's names in the first-grade classroom and the students' monthly grades and a proverb in the fourth-grade classroom. Each student owned a copy of the *Libro de Español*, the Spanish language arts textbook provided free-of-charge by the Mexican government. This textbook serves as the basis of the federally required national literacy curriculum (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2001) and is used by all elementary schools in the country. Although the national government has recently promoted small libraries within elementary classrooms through the *Libros del Rincón (Book Corners)*, these had yet to be installed. At the time of our study, the book collection in each classroom consisted of the students' copies of the *Libro de Español* along with a few other books, mostly dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference books provided by the teachers. Children were expected to bring to class a set of colored pencils, pencil sharpeners, and, in the fourth grade, a personal Spanish dictionary. Students in both classrooms were also required to keep a *libreta*, a small notebook for recording homework and class writing activities, as is typical in Mexican elementary schools (Ballesteros, 2003; Hernández Pineda, 2007).

Most tasks the children completed during class time involved the production of written texts. This section describes the types of writing observed at school and those that the participants reported doing outside school, followed by a discussion of their expressed attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions related to writing and writing instruction.

The first thing students typically did was write their names and the date at the top of the page in their notebooks any time a written assignment was given. In the first grade, the children could either copy this information directly off the board, where the teacher had usually written it, or write it on their own. In the fourth grade, the teacher rarely used the chalkboard for instruction, so the students would include this information without copying it from a guide on the board.

The fourth-graders, after writing the date and their names, would continue with the assignment of the day, such as a dictation. However, the first-graders would often spend most (if not all) of the class time writing and rewriting their own names. In fact, every week the teacher would hand out cards with the student's name written on them, and the students were instructed to copy it multiple times in their notebooks. This repetition, known locally as *planas*, typically continued until the children had filled an entire page or two.

Other types of writing done in the first-grade classroom included the letters of the alphabet, syllables, and individual words. Following the national curriculum, each week the teacher chose letters and syllables on which the children were directed to focus their attention,

(e.g., the letter “q” and the syllables “que” and “qui”). After practicing their pronunciation, the teacher introduced a few words that contained these syllables (e.g. *quiero*, *queso*, *banquito*, *quesadilla*), which she wrote on the chalkboard. She then directed the students to copy these letters, syllables, and words over and over in their notebooks. In other words, instruction in this grade level typically consisted of copying and repetition exercises, such as that seen in Figure 1 below. On this particular occasion, the letter-of-the-week was “g” and the syllables “gue” and “gui.”

We found student-authored writing to be almost completely absent in the first-grade classroom. The children were rarely asked to write phrases or sentences, much less paragraphs or entire texts or stories. Similarly, the fourth-grade students were often instructed to produce phrases and sentences, with heavy emphasis on meta-linguistic aspects such as the identification of subject and predicate. Student writing in this classroom was usually done for non-communicative purposes and involved either copying or transcribing texts that had been provided by the teacher. During a typical lesson, for example, the fourth-grade teacher instructed the students to “*copiar el párrafo del libro de lecturas de la página 28*” (copy the paragraph from page 28 of the reading book) for homework.

The writing practice observed most frequently in the fourth grade was teacher-led dictation. During all classes observed the teacher walked around the classroom while reading aloud a text that the students were expected to reproduce in their notebooks. This activity sometimes lasted for most of the 45-minute class period. Another notable feature of these dictations was that they were very explicit as far as the placement of punctuation, accent marks, and spelling. For instance, on one occasion the dictation was recorded as follows:

“Anoten: Ejercicio, con ‘j’ y doble ‘c.’ Ordena alfabéticamente las siguientes palabras y anota adelante de cada una de ellas su significado. Avestruz, con ‘v’ chica, Pecera, con ‘c,’ Amanecer, con ‘c’ y Ventana, con ‘v.’”

(Write: ‘Ejercicio’ [Exercise], with “j” and double “c.” Order alphabetically the following words and write down beside each one its meaning. ‘Avestruz’ [ostrich], written with “v,” ‘Pecera’ [fish tank], with “c,” ‘Amanecer’ [dawn], with “c,” and ‘Ventana’ [window], with “v.”)

We never observed dictations that were connected to children’s lives or aspects of community life beyond the school. In the first-grade classroom, the teacher sometimes provided short phrases or sentences that featured students’ names, but these seemed to be included more for their phonemic value (e.g., because they contained a particular sound-symbol relationship that the class was working on) rather than for their semantic content. In the fourth-grade classroom, dictated sentences were organized around content words that were part of the lesson set by the national curriculum rather than a reflection of community life.

As already noted, researchers of Mexican literacy instruction have consistently reported a heavy emphasis on form and “correctness.” We also observed this pattern, especially in the fourth-grade classroom. Both teachers chose activities that allowed the children to practice formal aspects of the language (i.e. dictations, copying), and they likewise focused on these aspects when evaluating student progress. For instance, at the beginning of the school year the fourth-grade teacher required his students to line up around his desk so that he could “check” their writing. On several occasions the teacher told certain children that they had to improve their handwriting if they wished for him to accept their work. Similarly, the first-grade teacher frequently organized competitions to see which student could write the “prettiest.”

We also observed (in both classrooms) an insistence on the use of the color red for writing titles, subtitles, capital letters, accents, and numbers. This use of the color red was documented for essentially all written assignments. In other words, salient features of written language were distinguished from others, such as in the example shown in Figure 2, a dictation produced by a female student in the first grade.

What we found most striking with regard to the practice of writing in the color red was the fact that the children would not begin their assignments if they had forgotten to bring red colored pencils. During one class, for instance, a male student in the first grade sat in the back of the room without working until the teacher was able to get him a set of colored pencils. We see this practice as evidence that dominant ideologies about writing (i.e. neatness and “correctness”) are apparently acquired by children even as they are developing the skills valued in schooled literacy, in this case the conventional use of upper- and lower-case letters.

Our interviews and observations revealed that neither teacher integrated home or community texts into classroom instruction. The only exception we observed occurred when the fourth-grade teacher asked his students to make a poster advertising an event in or around the school. For the next class the children presented their work at the front of the room. Significantly, although some of the posters contained spelling mistakes (i.e. *necesitados*, “needy,” written unconventionally as *nececitados*), the teacher did not make explicit corrections on this particular occasion. What is interesting about this exception is that the poster was created to communicate necessary information. While the Mexican national curriculum for fourth-grade language arts contains three activities in which students create posters for communicative purposes (requesting donations for flood victims, offering free puppies, promoting the sale of Tarahumara ceramics and handicrafts) (Subsecretaría de Educación Básica y Normal, 2004), the creation of this text, however, fell outside the official curriculum. This feature may have been the reason why the teacher decided not to correct the spelling mistake. Of course, he may simply have failed to notice the mistake, but this is unlikely given the insistence on correctness we observed in this classroom. Also, because parents were not going to observe this text, the teacher may have felt less need to correct it.

Other than a few intermittent examples, however, instruction concentrated on the formal aspects of writing. Another factor may have been the extra work involved for the teachers. For instance, the fourth-grade teacher commented on the lack of preparation time and the expense of supplementary materials. Moreover, the parents’ attitudes toward forms of community literacy (e.g. they said it was “vulgar,” “non-constructive,” “limited,” and “poorly written”) almost certainly influenced the teachers’ decision not to include them in instruction.

Attitudes toward Writing. As described above, the attitudes toward writing most commonly reported by participants included expectations of “correctness” and neatness requiring considerable attention to language form, namely punctuation, accent marks, spelling, and handwriting. It seems as though all three groups – parents, students, and teachers - held similar beliefs concerning these aspects, illustrated by a comment made by the fourth-grade teacher:

“Voy haciendo hincapié en cómo se escriben determinadas palabras, para que no cometan un error de ortografía. Posteriormente, cuando reviso las tareas, voy checando y corrigiendo la ortografía. Les digo el porqué. Y también si reviso el trabajo del salón hago lo mismo.”

(I emphasize how certain words are written so that they (the students) don’t make a spelling error. Later, when I check their homework, I check and correct spelling. I tell them why. And also, if I check their work in the classroom, I do the same thing.)

The parents likewise commented on the importance of writing “correctly.” Common responses included “*un párrafo sin los puntos es difícil de entender*” (a paragraph without periods is hard to understand) and “*los acentos sirven para diferenciar las palabras unas de otras*” (accent marks help to distinguish certain words from others). When asked, several mothers participating in this study remarked that these types of mistakes “bothered” them. This emphasis on form was frequently observed during classroom observations, and we often overheard the children ask their teachers how a word was spelled or whether it included an accent mark. On a few occasions, the students even corrected their teachers’ writing!

A fourth-grade teacher told us that the reason he spent so much time correcting student-produced texts was that parents expected him to do so: “*No le entienden y creen que por eso el niño no aprende o el maestro no enseña*” (they don’t understand and they think for this reason the child doesn’t learn or the teacher doesn’t teach.) He also said that some of the children’s parents would get upset because certain errors in their work were not corrected. These comments are interesting because they suggest that parents’ expectations concerning form seem to influence instruction even as the national curriculum is being reformed to stress writing for communicative purposes.

One mother alluded to larger, dominant discourses around literacy, stating that students from working-class homes need only basic forms of literacy:

“Allá en la comunidad donde yo vivo toda la gente se dedica a cortar tabique. Entonces, luego tienen como diez chamaquitos, así, ¿no? Y todos los ponen a pisar el relodo, para hacer tabique. Y les están enseñando un oficio y entonces no les parece importante que los niños vayan a la escuela porque al final de cuentas, van a dedicarse a eso y de ahí van a sacar para comer. O sea, para ellos es lo importante. Entonces no, la gente no lee, no le interesa leer ni escribir.

In the community where I live, everybody makes bricks. Each family has like ten kids, you know? And they put them all to work in the mud, to make bricks. They’re teaching them this trade, so it’s not important to them that the children go to school because, in the end, they’re going to be brick makers--that’s how they’re going to make their living. So people don’t read; they’re just not interested in reading or writing.

This statement reflects the disconnect between literacy instruction and people’s everyday lives. It also gives voice to a deficit view of the literacy needs of Mexican children and thus may appear to justify less rigorous instruction. While it is possible that this parent could be expressing frustration with a curriculum that is largely divorced from the lived experiences of the community, this interpretation is not supported by our data.

Most of the mothers commented that the examples of writing seen in Figure 3 were very different from school-produced texts with respect to content and form. This perception may explain why their attitudes toward locally produced texts were somewhat negative. One mother commented: “*Traen muchas frases vulgares. Y en la escuela los libros de texto son muy constructivos*” ([Community texts] are full of vulgarities. And, at school, the textbooks are very constructive). Another parent, when asked about these writings, responded: “*Para empezar, mal escrito. Mucha falta de ortografía. Temas corrientes. Yo siento que no tienen ninguna enseñanza. Ninguna aportación buena.*” (To begin with, [community texts] are poorly written. Lots of misspelled words. Simple topics. I feel they don’t teach anything. Nothing good anyway.) The other mothers agreed with these opinions of non-school writing.

Discussion

Previous studies of Mexican literacy instruction have also reported that teachers place considerable emphasis on the appearance and form of students' writing (Ballesteros, 2003; Carrasco Altamirano, 2003; De la Garza and Ruiz Ávila, 1994; Ferreiro, 1989; Author, 2003; Kimbrough, 2004; Author, 2005; Author, 2004). Nevertheless, what we found striking were the participants' responses when we asked why people write, that is, why writing is (or is not) important. Interestingly, teachers and parents alike claimed that writing is ultimately about communicating ideas. For example, the fourth-grade teacher said: "*La gente escribe para transmitir lo que desea o el mensaje que quiere dar. Para comunicarse, de manera escrita, claro.*" (People write to transmit what they desire, or the message they wish to express. To communicate in written form, of course). Similarly, the mothers made comments such as "*quien escribe tiene algo que decir*" (those who write have something to say) and "*escribir es una pasión*" (writing is a passion).

These comments, while consistent with the Mexican national literacy curriculum's recent embrace of communication as the center of language arts instruction, can be contrasted with the paucity of communicative writing activities observed in classrooms. Practically all the writing produced at school was based on copying exercises, dictations, and/or the repetition of letters, syllables, and weekly vocabulary. In other words, the students were not "authoring" their own texts (Barton, 1994); rather, it seemed as though they were primarily learning to present short texts "correctly" according to prescribed linguistic conventions strongly held by their parents and teachers. Within the space of the classroom, written language was treated with reverence and novices were disciplined through recurring literacy events to handle it as though it were a sacrosanct object or practice.

These activities echo those described by Heath (1972) in her account of literacy instruction during the Mexican colonial period. She concluded that schooling during that period succeeded in "stuffing students with trivia" (p. 58), that educators were obsessed with "precision in penmanship" (p. 59), and, to the extent there was any literacy instruction at all, "students learned to read and write badly" (p. 61). While there are great differences between contemporary schooling and the forms developed during the colonial period, we argue that certain continuities perdure alongside the changes (Author, 2008). Here, historical traces of Mexico's colonial past appear to exert a lasting and visible influence on contemporary practices. Given that schooling in the past was designed to mark and maintain a distinction between Mexicans of European descent and those of indigenous origin, we wonder about the implications of the continuity of form over communication for the country's present-day students.

At the outset of the study we wondered whether the participants would hold different attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions toward writing practices in the three focus contexts: school, home, and community. We found that participating teachers, students, and mothers expressed similar ideas about literacy, possibly because most of them had grown up, lived, and studied in the research context. All three groups tended to favor school-based literacies, not only because they valued the types of texts typically found in schools, but also because they seemed to consider school as the principal setting where literacy should be taught, practiced, and learned. This finding reflects the situated nature of these literacy practices and the fact that all of our participants shared common historical, social, political, and economic influences on their conceptualizations of literacy. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) argue that "practices always have a reflexive dimension: people always generate representations of what they do as part of

what they do” (p. 22). These representations, however, are shaped by their context. What we found interesting was that people’s conceptualizations about writing could contradict their practices. We believe that it is at these points of contradiction that spaces for productive change might be created. These possibilities, we believe, can best be implemented through instruction.

Implications for Instructional Practice

Based on our findings, we would encourage teachers to experiment with ways to relate in-class writing activities to out-of-school situations and problems. For example, we noted the case of the fourth-grade teacher, whose students created advertisements of local events. Unlike other instances in the national curriculum in which students create announcements of events and services related to other imaginary or distant communities, this text was created for necessary communication about real events in the students’ own community. As such, it fell outside of the official curriculum and recognized school practices. We theorize that its creation may have created a space in which different rules concerning writing applied. In other words, we see some instructional possibilities in this example that we believe are hopeful.

In addition, at a public elementary school near our focus school, we observed first graders creating posters advertising goods and services at businesses they had imagined. Interestingly, these invented stores and businesses closely resembled those in the surrounding community, as did some of the children’s writing. As research on Mexican classrooms is beginning to stress (see Vernon, 2004), writing instruction can focus on communication, voice, and creativity as well as on the formal aspects of written language. Literacy lessons that emphasize comprehension, critique, opinions, reflection, analysis, and synthesis are more likely to empower learners to use literacy in useful and productive ways in their own personal, academic, and professional lives. In this way, students learn to recognize and avoid errors in form but also to understand that formal aspects are part of a larger system of written communication.

Educators likewise could consider their students’ prior knowledge and experiences before exposing them to materials and tasks that may be completely new and too difficult for them. Thus, the inclusion of local texts and resources could serve as bridges to more academic forms of literacy. Teachers, parents, and students, and other community residents could join to discuss the literacy needs in their own lives, including the job-related literacies that are typically dismissed as unimportant and irrelevant to children’s literacy development (Kalman, 2004; Peredo Merlo, 2005). For example, the parent’s comment that many of the children are going to work making bricks, whether or not they actually do end up engaging in this kind of work as adults, suggests a need to determine the literacy practices involved in making, transporting, selling, and keeping written records in the family brick business (Shadow & Rodriguez-Shadow, 1992). While we did not collect data on this topic, we are certain that some reading and writing practices are involved in this and most all other economic activity in this locale. In this way, writing instruction would be more clearly connected to the uses of written language found in children’s homes and communities.

One specific means of fostering this connection would be to include analysis of local texts like that found in Figure 3. Such texts could be used as the basis for a lesson or series of lessons to teach important ideas and content, including a focus on the shape and form of the message, its orthographic features, punctuation and diacritics, message and purpose, the intended audience, its author, and the ways it is embedded in an economic, material, and socio-political context. We suggest that students begin by first reading the message. Through discussion, the

teacher could determine how well students comprehend it. Attention could then be shifted to the features of the text. The class might note that the text is written in all upper-case letters and the teacher might ask, “Why might the author of this text have chosen upper-case letters rather than lower-case letters?” If students understand that messages in upper case frequently omit accent marks and other diacritic conventions in Spanish, the teacher could ask, “Where are the accent marks? Why are they missing?” Next, the teacher could ask students what the purpose of the message is. “How well does the author succeed at communicating this message?” “What are some possible outcomes for this message in terms of money, people’s appearance, or happiness?” Finally, we would ask students to think about the likely audience for this message. Questions we would ask include “Do you think this message was written for children, men, women, tourists, wealthy people, or working people?” “Will the intended audience see this message?” “How is this message different from or similar to the kinds of writing we do in schools?” “What did this author need to know to write this message?”

The intended goals here would be for students to learn how conventions help communicate ideas and, simultaneously, how the communication of ideas and information is the ultimate aim of the writer. In other words, this activity and others like it would provide students with knowledge of spelling, punctuation, diacritics, and other writing conventions with a dual focus on accuracy and how these conventions help convey meaning. By recruiting participants’ ideologies of literacy through a respectful recognition of their views, teachers can push students to consider other possibilities. Our goal through activities like these is to raise awareness of common, everyday literacy practices and how these are conceptualized and perceived. We recommend this compare-and-contrast technique to provoke some dissonance as a starting point for considering new practices and reformulated conceptualizations of literacy.

We think that such activities are potentially important because they would help student writers develop a meta-textual ability to recognize, categorize, and evaluate texts based on their content, their placement or location, as well as their form and function. At present, students are surrounded by texts that are either highly communicative in terms of their message or highly conventional in terms of their form, but not both. Although teachers have been intrigued by the possibilities of looking at texts in these ways, it also appears that parents’ views and teachers’ own professional training prevent them from modifying deeply engrained ideologies concerning literacy and its instruction.

We recognize that altering the curriculum in the ways that we have suggested will engender some resistance. Furthermore, there are currently few structures (such as curriculum materials) in place to assist teachers in modifying their instructional practices in a programmatic fashion. These ideas would need to be introduced by educators with a strong understanding of how non-school texts operate in students’ and families’ lives in particular settings. We believe that research on our proposed instructional changes ought to proceed simultaneously with its introduction in classrooms. We elaborate below on some of these ideas.

Implications for Future Research

The inclusion of publicly displayed texts and community literacy practices into the curriculum like we have described above needs to be piloted, and opportunities to reflect on these texts’ use in classrooms need to be incorporated into planning for future instruction. In something like a formative experiment (Reinking & Bradley, 2008) or design research (Gravemeijer & Cobb, 2006), modifications of the curriculum and adaptations to instruction can

be introduced to move students toward the goal of becoming more fully literate and informed concerning the power of literacy and its influence on their community. Of course, these changes and modifications need to be carefully documented, reflected upon, and analyzed to produce new theoretical understandings and instructional implications. Finding ways to highlight the historical, economic, political, and social influences on literacy practices will require explicit attention.

Given the pressing need for additional research on Mexican literacies, we would like to suggest possible directions for future studies exploring what we see as interesting and fundamental issues regarding home, community, and school literacy practices. From a curriculum standpoint, it is important to compare the findings of studies conducted at the elementary level (Ballesteros, 2003; Author, 2003; Kimbrough, 2004; Author, 2004; Vance, 2005; Author, 2007) with research on writing instruction and literacy development in middle and high school. Such research could reveal whether teachers at higher levels of instruction in Mexico continue to stress the formal aspects of written language, as has been suggested by Vázquez González (2004) for university-level students. If, as Peredo Merlo (2003) claimed, higher-level writing is intentionally postponed until *preparatoria* (high school), the many Mexicans who leave school at the end of *secundaria* (middle school), including transnationals who migrate to the U.S. (Cortina, 2005), may receive little formal instruction in their native language to develop these abilities. Such a finding, if confirmed, has implications for schools serving Mexican immigrant students in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Conclusion

This study identified writing practices in two Mexican classrooms as well as participants' attitudes towards different forms of writing (school, home, community). We argue that participants' ideas and attitudes toward different types of literacy inevitably influence the teaching and learning of writing both at school and in the community. In addition to providing much needed data on the teaching of writing in a non-Anglophone context (Ivanič, 2004), the findings of this project demonstrate how particular sociocultural contexts affect local ideology and practice, suggesting that the practice of generalizing results from research in other contexts, such as the United States, to Mexico, is unproductive. We hope that these results are useful for educators and researchers who are concerned with the literacy learning of Mexican children.

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