

# LITERACY AND LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT IN GUATEMALA

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## PROJECTS OVERVIEW

The March 2006 work in Guatemala was defined by a general concern with issues of literacy. Kevin Smith and Diane Kaiser's piece, "The Guatemalan Library Project," succinctly summarizes why literacy possesses such a central role in the work of McMaster scholars and fellows.

Kaiser and Smith's library project had one basic consideration: the development of libraries for Colegio Evangélico Shaddai and the small community of Chiquimulilla. Their project was augmented by the work of Defiance College students Erby Lopez, Aleisha Wiemken, and Brooke Lancey.

Lopez developed and implemented a pen pal project between students in Defiance and Chiquimulilla. Wiemken, assisted by Dr. William Finerty, visited several clinics and hospitals to research the impact that illiteracy has on health care. Lancey began work on a bilingual children's book, which will find its place in the Chiquimulilla library when it is completed. The work and expertise of Nancy Bontrager deserves special mention as her translation abilities and close relationship with Cleidy and Anibal Westendorff were indispensable to our work.

## THE GUATEMALA LIBRARY PROJECT

Kevin L. Smith  
Diane L. Kaiser

The original project to develop a school library at Colegio Evangélico Shaddai and perhaps a community library for Chiquimulilla, Guatemala, was inspired in part by some Guatemalan billboards that proclaimed “el pueblo que lee, progresa” (the town that reads, progresses). By the spring of 2005, our principal concern was researching the feasibility of a library project targeted generally at Guatemala. We were equally concerned with a library project targeting the “pueblo” of Chiquimulilla. For this research, we needed to identify appropriate resources and to examine social conditions and economic challenges that would affect our work.



### RESOURCES FOR RESEARCH

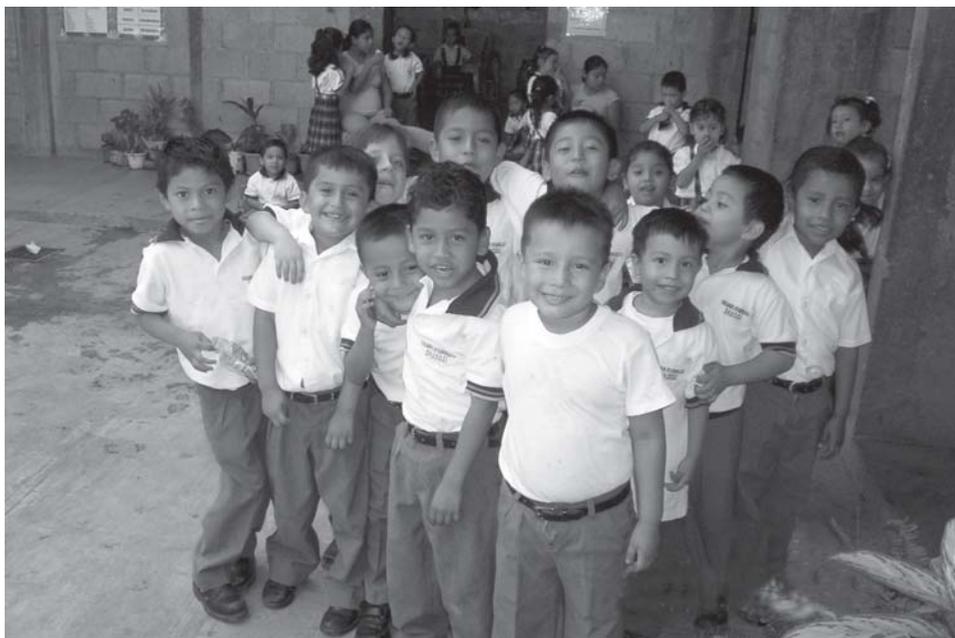
Our learning community viewed a number of films about Guatemala during the months prior to the trip, and we all studied books about the country. *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1984), a memoir by the Nobel Prize-winning organizer of indigenous Mayan resistance to government-sponsored violence and exploitation by large ranch owners, was a crucial resource, as

was Lyle Campbell's *Papers on the Xinca of Eastern Guatemala* (1975). One of the interesting discoveries we made through this research was that, although much of the material we studied emphasized the ravages of Guatemala's long civil war and the oppression suffered by the indigenous Mayans, these tragedies had less impact on Chiquimulilla than on other parts of the country. The southeastern province of Santa Rosa, where Chiquimulilla is located, is well removed from the highlands in which so many atrocities took place, and its people are descended from the Xinca, not from the Mayans, who have such a long tradition of conflict with the Ladino-controlled government of Guatemala.

A very important resource that Diane Kaiser discovered for our specific project was the manual, *Libraries for All!: How to Start and Run a Basic Library* (Wendell 1998), prepared by the World Library Partnership. This volume, available in both English and Spanish, was a valuable tool for discerning what questions we needed to pursue in Chiquimulilla and for guiding our discussions with the Directors of Colegio Shaddai, Cleidy and Anibal Westendorff.

The most valuable resource for focusing the library project was the time our team spent in Guatemala, working at Colegio Shaddai and traveling in Guatemala to learn first hand the conditions in which the library project would take shape. Two visits were particularly important in this regard. Our visit to the Chiquimulilla public school provided us with the opportunity to talk with the school principal. Our visit to the Tiquisate community library provided us with the opportunity to talk with the current and the former principals of the school in which the library was first developed, as well as one of the librarians. The Westendorffs accompanied us on this latter visit and provided another important point of reference as we talked together about how to establish and effectively run a library in Chiquimulilla. In those conversations we also learned that the Westendorffs had thought deeply about the library project before our arrival, and their vision for what may be accomplished provides the framework for our ongoing work.

The Westendorffs have taken many steps on their own toward a library in Colegio Shaddai. Although much construction on the school itself remains to be done, a room to house the library has been completed and stands ready to receive books. Kevin Smith worked with the Westendorffs on methods for cataloging their school's collection, which now includes a set of encyclopedias and ten classroom sets of textbooks for the entire curriculum at each grade level. These texts were delivered to Colegio Shaddai in



October. Bookshelves for the library were built by Guatemalan carpenters and delivered to the school shortly afterward in December.

### **SOCIAL CONDITIONS**

The problem of illiteracy is severe in Guatemala, especially among the adult population and in rural areas. Statistics on literacy rates vary, however. Cooperative for Education (1999–2006) reports literacy rates as low as 14%. UNICEF (2006) provides much higher numbers: overall adult literacy is estimated to be around 69%. However, in rural areas the literacy rate drops as low as 28% (Reach Out International 2000). Celina Zubieta reports that “nearly one-third of the 11.6 million people of Guatemala cannot read or write.” She further reports that “most of the 32.7 percent of people who are illiterate are women and people living in rural areas” (1999, 1).

According to Cooperative for Education (1999–2006), 93% of the rural population lives in poverty. Guatemala Literacy Project (1999–2006) adds that the high rates are due in large part to a lack of “fundamental learning tools” and that this caustic mixture of poverty and poor education becomes linked to discrimination. Together, illiteracy and poverty exacerbate human suffering.

During our visit to the public school in Chiquimulilla, we discovered that a lack of available resources was a major obstacle to improving literacy. The

public school had no library at all. Although there are approximately one hundred public libraries in Guatemala, they are not enough to support a population of 10 million people and they simply do not exist in most rural areas (Cameron 1998). The need for books in both public and private schools throughout Guatemala is also great. There were simply too few government-supplied textbooks in Chiquimulilla to serve all of the students. The principal told us that two or three students had to share each book for in-class work, leaving little opportunity for independent study.

Suspicion of the government was also an obstacle. This suspicion even prevented many children, especially among the Mayan peoples, from attending school. This fear of education and entanglement with the government was not entirely surprising because Menchu's memoir voices her fear that learning to read and speak Spanish may cause her to lose touch with her traditional culture (1984, 32). Although the civil war has been over for more than ten years, many people still do not trust the government. Parental reluctance to send children to school is one manifestation of that mistrust. The fact that the library on which we are working will be at a private school unrelated to the Guatemalan government may, in fact, be a benefit from this point of view.

Related to the general suspicion of the government is the issue of multiple languages. Guatemala's indigenous peoples speak twenty-two different languages (Menchu 1984, 161-62), while all official communication is in Spanish. As has been previously noted, some indigenous Guatemalans see learning Spanish as an attack on traditional cultural values. This fear and the proliferation of languages obviously inhibit the development of literacy. The problem, however, is much less of an issue in Chiquimulilla than it is in other parts of Guatemala because the residents of Chiquimulilla are thoroughly assimilated into Ladino culture and Spanish is universally spoken in that area.

Surely linked to this assimilation is the greater number of young people who are now attending school and remaining in school. In the past, many children attended school only for short periods of time. They left school to work on family farms or to take other jobs to support their families. According to Zubieta, the peace accords of 1996 called for government efforts to reduce illiteracy rates by 2000, and the Ministry of Education's goal was to reduce illiteracy by 30%. The peace accords also called for increases in government spending on education and "mandatory primary education for the first three grades," including all children between the ages

of seven and twelve, as well as “bi-lingual education in rural areas” (1999, 1). The current president of Guatemala, Oscar Berger (2003), has even made education the number one priority of his administration.

### ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Several of our trips in Guatemala were to medical clinics. On those visits we heard repeatedly about the difficulty of sending supplies to Guatemala, because of high taxes levied against donated goods and because of a general suspicion about the motives of North Americans who send materials into the country. Many officials doubt the altruism of such donations, and materials are often held up for long periods while there is an inquiry into possible ulterior motives. This attitude poses an obvious problem for the operation of medical clinics, and it also presents a significant challenge for planning a library: either library materials that can be purchased directly in Guatemala must be located, or some way of transporting donated materials into the country must be found. We learned in Tiquisate that the library there largely relied on the personal delivery of donated materials as well as occasional trips to Guatemala City to purchase materials directly. If large quantities of various materials, especially as an initial collection for the library in Chiquimulilla, are purchased outside of Guatemala, some method of delivery other than direct shipment may be necessary.

One way to provide resources for a library that would avoid this problem is, of course, the internet. Online resources seem ideally suited for a new library in a developing nation, offering access to a tremendous range of resources at a keystroke. We were delighted to discover that Colegio Shaddai now has several computers in a dedicated computer room and that one of these terminals has internet access. Nevertheless, online access to appropriate resources is not without problems. At the request of the Westendorffs, we began looking into possible online resources for the school and quickly encountered an ironic situation. The vendor of the principal online Spanish-language encyclopedia that is available to students in Ohio told us that it was not available for licensing in Central America or even in Puerto Rico. The reason is that the producer of this resource believes that a market still exists in these areas for print products, and they do not want to undermine that market. Thus, this Spanish-language resource is not available online to the large Spanish-speaking population of the hemisphere. That population is thereby denied much of the internet’s resources.

If supplying both print materials and online resources presents difficulties, it would seem that providing financial support for a library in Guatemala

should be a simple matter. Nevertheless, even here we encountered the need for careful thought and planning. In talking with the people involved with the library in Tiquisate—both those in Guatemala and the patrons who provide support from the U.S.—we learned that a legal structure was needed to put the necessary financial support in place. The Tiquisate library is heavily dependent on the Books and Wings foundation, a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation in the U.S. That foundation provides all of the materials for the library and pays most of the librarians' salaries. To make this work, the U.S. foundation relates to a library committee in Tiquisate, which is a registered "persona juridical" in Guatemala, according to Todd Phoenix (pers. comm.). For the library project in Chiquimulilla, we continue to explore whether a similar legal structure is necessary to accomplish our goals and would be acceptable to the Westendorffs.

### ONGOING WORK

As the McMaster School and its fellows and scholars continue to work on the library project in Guatemala, several tasks stand out. First, the library project needs to continue pursuing funding sources and to examine possible legal structures that will facilitate the flow of support to the library at Colegio Shaddai. Related to that is the need to seek out suppliers for the materials necessary to stock and run a library. This would include people and organizations that would donate books and other materials, as well as vendors whose products could be purchased for the library. Overcoming problems with shipping and with vendor reluctance to license online resources for the library will be continuing challenges.

As the library in Chiquimulilla takes shape, there will also be significant work that can be done on site to ensure an efficient and effective operation. In the short term, there is work needed to create the appropriate physical environment for a library. Colegio Shaddai has identified a room in which to begin a library operation, but doors and windows will have to be added to that space before materials are housed there.

We will continue to purchase textbooks so that all students will eventually have their own personal copies. In March 2007 we will deliver approximately one hundred trade books to support reading lessons developed by Emily Meyer, a 2006–2007 McMaster scholar. During this same March trip, Colegio Shaddai will hold an open house to celebrate the opening of the school library.

A little further down the road, training programs to help students make effective use of a library will have to be developed, as will a process for

identifying and training a librarian. The role of librarian may well be appropriate for an older student or a teacher at the school, so long as proper training is available. These projects offer a wonderful opportunity for Defiance College faculty and students to be involved in concrete professional tasks that will help make the library in Chiquimulilla a reality, thus taking a significant step toward addressing the problem of illiteracy in Guatemala.

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## LITERACY AND HEALTHCARE

Aleisha Wiemken

Poverty has a great impact on healthcare, especially in third world countries, such as Guatemala. Many in Guatemala are forced to go to public facilities for their healthcare or rely solely on their own medical knowledge. The following describes the problem of health care in the context of poverty and illiteracy. The focus on literacy allows me to suggest one small way in which health care can be improved for many of those who are non-literate.

### GUATEMALAN HEALTH CARE

The average life expectancy in Guatemala is 68 years with an infant mortality rate of 33 per 1,000 live births (The World Bank 2007). According to Pan American Health Organization, Guatemala scored an 18.5 incidence of malarial infection per 1000 people in 2001. There were 2,820 registered cases of tuberculosis and 307 cases of AIDS. Each one of these numbers could be reduced if Guatemalans had an easier time accessing health care ("Country health profile," 2001).

After the Peace Accord was signed in December 1996, conditions finally improved in Guatemala. With peace, the nation finally had time to focus on issues like public finance, education, and health. The government created a series of health policies that were to be addressed from 1996 to 2000. The Pan American Health Organization reports that policies were focused on restructuring health programs, offering better basic health care, managing hospitals, educating the public about environmental issues, improving water quality and sanitation, including the public in decisions about programs and services, and developing cooperation at the international level ("Health situation," 2001).

These new health issues are being tackled by the government, and so far the overall health of the population has improved. Pregnant women are being monitored throughout pregnancy. They are also being given tetanus shots and attention during childbirth. Children are given individual attention as well. For children under two years of age, there are now nutrition-based programs, vaccinations, and a greater control of acute infections of the respiratory system and diarrhea-producing diseases. Individuals also benefit through better emergency care and improved prevention and treatment of diseases like malaria, dengue, cholera, tuberculosis, and respiratory infections (Pan American Health Organization, "Health situation," 2001).

## THE PRESCRIPTIONS PROBLEM AND A POSSIBLE SOLUTION

Like anyone else, a Guatemalan citizen who gets sick will try to cure the illness as quickly as possible. Suppose, however, that the ill person does not read. Often, a non-literate adult will bring in a child or close relative who is literate to have the directions read aloud. This solution is not always possible, however. If a person cannot read well—or not at all—and forgets a doctor’s instructions, then the person may take the prescription incorrectly.

It is essential for a sick person to be able to “read” the directions on a pill bottle. A very simple picture format, perhaps a single page handout with several different pictures for each patient, may help to remedy the above problem. A picture with one pill could signify that only one pill needs to be taken. A picture of a sunrise would signify that the prescription needs to be taken in the morning, while a picture with the moon and stars would signify that the prescription needs to be taken at night. A picture of food would signify that the prescription needs to be taken along with food.

This page of pictures could be created by health care centers and then be given to patients after their doctors have verbally explained how a prescription needs to be taken. There should also be very simple sentences written at the bottom of each picture so that, if necessary, a literate person—even a child—would be able to read the directions. This concrete suggestion might begin to address one effect of illiteracy in health care.

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## FIGHTING STEREOTYPES THROUGH EDUCATION AND RELATIONSHIPS

Erby Lopez

The facilitation of communication between groups in the global community is crucial as we work toward relieving human suffering. Spreading knowledge aids in diminishing one of the great root causes of human suffering: ignorance. Cultural and ethnic ignorance can be a great source of human suffering. Stereotypes due to ignorance allow racism and perceived national superiority to flourish in the minds of those of differing cultures and national backgrounds. These attitudes can set up barriers that impede the relationships between cultures and nations. Such attitudes often block the transmission of information, skills, and ideas that may prove beneficial to both sides. Ignorance, racism and hate may lead to open hostility between groups.

Stereotypes, racism, and perceived superiority begin developing at a very early age. They are often influenced by an older generation that is often misled and ignorant about issues concerning ethnicity and culture outside of the group. Because of this, an important element of any program aimed at making people active world citizens should involve instructing and informing children about the geographies, histories, and cultural values of communities outside their own society. Educating children about geographic and cultural diversity can help them be better prepared and more open to interaction with people outside their own families, communities and countries.



A pen pal project that the McMaster School sponsored was designed to foster just such an interaction between students in Ohio and Guatemala. My hope for this project was that a correspondence would develop into an ongoing communication between the two groups and allow them to learn more about each other's histories, geographies, social customs, and even languages.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand how to best approach my project, I had to gain an understanding of stereotypes. The questions that drove my research were the following:

### *What are American stereotypes of Latin America and its people?*

In the article "Stereotypes of Latin Americans Perpetuated in Secondary School History Textbooks" (1994), Barbara C. Cruz deals with the use of Latin American stereotypes in high school textbooks. The article cites the results of a study of six secondary school history textbooks. The author describes three general ways in which the textbooks convey a negative attitude toward those of Latin origin.

First, Latin America tends to be discussed in the context of war. Cruz notes two wars that are "identified repeatedly in the textbooks: 'The Mexican-American War' and 'The Spanish-American War'" (1994, 54). Second, the textbooks reinforce negative stereotypes of Latinos. As an example of this, Cruz states that "one of the most pernicious stereotypes concerning Latin America, and especially Mexico, is the lazy, slow-witted, siesta-taking Latin American" (55). The textbooks also subtly use adjectives, adverbs, and other grammatical and textual methods to disparage Latin Americans. Cruz states, "there are various phrases that are used in texts that surface time and again and encourage students to perceive Latin Americans as something to be taken, to be dominated, indeed, to be consumed" (56). Finally, Cruz argues that "when this stereotype is reinforced in textbooks, it encourages students to perceive Latin Americans as a lawless people, who are particularly corrupt and seditious" (60). In this way, the article points out how the American educational system may be contributing to the diffusion of negative stereotypes about Latinos and Latin America in general. As Cruz puts it, "millions of American students are being exposed to stereotypes of other cultures, and these perceptions are being reinforced in U.S. classrooms" (63).

*What stereotypes do Latin Americans hold of Americans?*

According to Stephen Connely Benz's *Guatemalan Journey*, a person who is a "nobody" in the U.S. can come to a position of prestige in Guatemala due merely to the stereotypes that Guatemalans hold about Americans. Benz says of his own experiences, "I was exalted solely because I was an American with a title, a title that did me no good at all in the States but meant everything in Guatemala" (1996, 102). Guatemalans also assume that Americans are all wealthy. Acquiring status, according to Benz, "did not require much money because Guatemalans *perceived* Americans to be wealthy, hence impoverished bums were treated as if they were wealthy, and their impoverishment was explained away as an eccentricity of *los norteamericanos*" (102). These stereotypes seem to be the result and mark of the neo-colonial attitude of the U.S. toward Guatemalan society. Benz argues that "it is one of the oddities of the neo-colonial arrangement that marginal or ordinary characters from the metropolis find themselves, in the periphery of empire, elevated to positions of importance and held in high esteem by the natives" (102).

*How aware are children of stereotypes, and how does this consciousness affect them?*

In their article "The Development and Consequences of Stereotypes in Middle Childhood," Clark McKown and Rhona S. Weinstein examine the idea of "stereotype consciousness," as opposed to "personal stereotypes" (2003, 499). These authors state that a child's awareness of the stereotypes of others can occur very early on. Such awareness occurs even earlier for those children who are members of a stigmatized group. McKown and Weinstein write that "research on ethnic minority children's developmental competence, ethnic identity development and racial socialization suggests that for children from stigmatized groups, the social context of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination may cause earlier awareness of broadly held stereotypes" (498).

In the authors' opinion, this is important to note because when children are aware of the stereotypes that others may hold of them, "they gain an insight into others' motives that profoundly affects their relationship to other individuals, social settings, and society" (McKown and Weinstein 2003, 498). This shows how ethnic stereotypes may be more prevalent in an ethnically heterogeneous society—where there may be more groups stigmatized because of ethnicity—than within an ethnically homogeneous society.

The authors' use of diagnostic tests also demonstrates how a child's performance may be affected if he or she knows that there are stereotypes held about him or her. The authors state, "awareness that others endorse stereotypes—herein referred to as stereotype consciousness—represents a radical change in children's understanding of the social world, and its consequences are not hard to imagine, especially in the arena of schooling" (McKown and Weinstein 2003, 498). Children from stigmatized groups perform less well on diagnostic tests due to this increased awareness of stereotypes (511).

### **PROCEDURES AND DESCRIPTION OF THE FINAL PRODUCT**

Between December 2005 and January 2006, I made a number of visits to a first grade class in Slocum Elementary School, Defiance, Ohio. My plan was to familiarize the children with Guatemala. I worked alongside the children, answered their questions, asked questions of them, and interacted with the children and their teachers.

I helped the children in Defiance write letters to the children in Guatemala, emphasizing personal facts, such as information about their families, pets, and what kind of sports they like to play. I aided the children in translating the letters from English to Spanish. Along with these letters, each child in Defiance created a portfolio that included the letter, an illustration, and a picture of him or herself. Along with the portfolio, the whole class contributed to the creation of a poster that included pictures of the students, some of the students' families, and the teacher, Mrs. Wahl.

In preparation for my visit in March, our in-country project partner, guide, and translator, Nancy Bontrager, delivered the letters in mid-January to the school in Chiquimulilla, Guatemala. Once the teachers and children received the letters, they began working on their own letters and poster. In March, having arrived in Guatemala, I aided the children in Chiquimulilla and their teachers with their part of the project. I met with the children, answering questions and sharing information about the U.S. with them. After a week, along with our group from Defiance College, I returned to Defiance and set to the task of translating the letters of the Guatemalan children into English.

Once the letters were translated, I returned to Slocum Elementary School. I presented the children with the letters and poster and answered their questions. With the assistance of Mrs. Wahl, I helped some of them read their letters. In the future, I will follow up with the children here in Defiance in order to better grasp the effect of this exchange on them.

## REFLECTION

The groups of children, instead of blindly holding stereotypes about each other, expressed no preconceived notions. The children in Ohio and Guatemala demonstrated significant curiosity about each other and, rather than being suspicious or mistrustful, welcomed the information shared with them. These experiences strengthened my belief that informing children in an open and positive way about the diverse world outside their homogeneous communities at an early point will help curb stereotype-based influences encountered throughout their lives.

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