

ADVANCING HUMANITY IN GUATEMALA

Learning Community

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THE STRUGGLE TOWARD LITERACY

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In March of 2005, Defiance College initiated a partnership with Colegio Evangelical Shaddai (CES), a small school in rural Chiquimulilla, Santa Rosa, Guatemala. CES is an evangelical Christian school that offers a largely secular curriculum with students from kindergarten through tenth grade. The school supports itself primarily through small tuition payments that it charges the students.

RETURNING TO GUATEMALA WITH BOOKS AND CURRICULA

The idea for a school library project germinated with a trip in 2005. In 2006 a McMaster Learning Community returned with resources to help the school plan and develop a library. The 2007 McMaster Learning Community raised over \$10,000 to purchase more than 100 books in Spanish and bookshelves for the library. In March 2007, only two years after our first visit, we celebrated the opening of the library. It was a grand event. Cledy and Anibal Westendorff, the school's founders and directors, had arranged a formal ceremony that was attended by students, parents, friends, and the members of our learning community. The ceremony featured speeches, songs, prayers, awards, and the introduction of the newly hired school librarian. The event culminated with an official ribbon cutting, a library tour, and a piñata party. On the day of the grand opening celebration, students, parents, and other community members – all of them visibly excited – thronged to the library to see their new books.



A primary goal of our learning community was to address illiteracy as one of the root causes of human suffering. CES provided the framework for our work. The school has been operating for 25 years, and up until three years ago, their teaching methods remained very traditional, marked by recitation and rote memorization. One of the reasons for this approach was that CES owned no books. Students were learning to read, but their literacy skills were functional, related only to what they copied from the board in the classroom. In order to increase their literacy skills, students needed books.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF LITERACY IN GUATEMALA

Discussing literacy in Guatemala is complicated because it is defined and measured in a variety of ways. The Guatemalan government defines literacy as “. . . the ability to read and write a simple paragraph in Spanish” (Hawkins, 2005). Lev Vygotsky, an educational psychologist, looks at literacy as a cultural tool, and he emphasizes that each culture has and values its own tools (Santrock, 2008). Reidence, Bean, and Baldwin (2004) offer an historical perspective of the evolving definition of literacy and point out that “. . . literacy is relative to societal demands.” For example, in 1840 the United States Census Bureau classified those who self-identified as being able to “read and write simple messages in any language” as literate. Literacy skills considered sufficient 100 years ago are “. . . clearly inadequate in today’s

world of credit cards, mass advertising, computers, big business, and income tax forms,” which lead these authors to ask, “Literate for what?” Readence et al conclude that defining literacy requires context.

The value a society places on literacy is rooted in its history, culture, and social conditions. The history of Guatemala is marked by violence and conquest. The Maya, the largest indigenous group in the country, whose culture dates back to at least 2000 BC, were conquered by the Mexican Toltecs by AD 1225. The Toltecs’s reign lasted until 1524 when the Spanish arrived and “. . . imposed the colonial system through a reign of terror” (O’Kane, 2006). Between that time and the 1870s, the Maya of Guatemala suffered domination by rich Spanish landowners and the Ladinos, those of mixed Spanish and Maya ancestry, who eventually forcibly acquired all indigenous lands by establishing coffee plantations.

By the 1930s, both the coffee growers and the American-owned United Fruit Company extended their power over Guatemala by building railroads and telephone lines, developments that provided no benefit to indigenous workers. As late as 1932, Maya workers were still subjected to Decree 1816, “. . . which exempted landowners from the consequences of any action taken to protect their goods or land, effectively legalizing the murder of rebellious Maya who resisted forced labor” (O’Kane, 2006).

The reign of terror continued when, in 1954, the CIA arranged the overthrow of the popular Guatemalan president, Juan Jose Arvalo (O’Kane, 2006; Perkins, 2004). Arvalo had instituted land reforms designed to assist his own country and people. He insisted on national sovereignty and was not a supporter of U.S. policy in Guatemala – and he had friends in the Communist party. In 1982, Guatemalan military man Rios Montt led a CIA-backed coup d’état in Guatemala, which took actions against the Maya that resulted in the bloodiest period of the country’s 36-year civil war – a war that finally ended with the Peace Accords of 1996. During that war, 200,000 Guatemalans were murdered or “disappeared,” 150,000 became refugees in other countries, another 1.5 million were internally displaced, and countless others became widows and orphans (Steinberg, 2005).

Guatemala’s violent history of conquest has profoundly shaped its culture and people’s attitudes about education, including literacy. As noted earlier, the Guatemalan government defines literacy in terms of an individual’s ability to read and write simple Spanish. As Hawkins (2005) points out, this ability would only be developed by attending the governmental school system. After third grade, most literacy is Spanish literacy. However, Spanish

is the language of oppression to the indigenous Maya, who have been known to refuse to learn the language as a form of resistance and a way to maintain a distinct cultural identity (O’Kane, 2006).

Across Guatemala, many children leave school at an early age in order to help provide for their families. In remote Mayan villages, people live today as they have for hundreds of years – at a subsistence level. Villagers regularly cut down trees with machetes for firewood for cooking, transport water on their heads from communal sources to public basins in their villages, weave their own fabrics by hand, and use corn stalks to build walls for their homes. Against this backdrop, Cutz and Chandler (2000) explain that personal needs and self-perceptions keep adult Maya from participating in literacy programs. “Literacy is not work . . .” but “. . . a diversion and detraction from work” and not working would threaten the family’s survival.

Manzoor Ahmed (1992) defines a nation’s policy on literacy as an issue of social justice. “Looking at the pattern of illiteracy in societies, one cannot but conclude that the degree and persistence of illiteracy reflects structural imbalances in a society, such as the distribution of political and economic power, the way in which political and economic policies and priorities are determined, and the way in which the systems and institutions implementing those policies are organized. The extent of illiteracy in a nation is a measure of that nation’s degree of attachment to principles of *social justice*.” Ahmed argues that an essential condition for “nurturing a culture of literacy [is] . . . effective primary education for children.”

PRIVATE LIBRARY – COMMUNITY RESOURCE

The primary goal of the library at CES is to provide opportunities for literacy development for the students of the school. However, following the model developed by a small rural library in Tiquisate, a town not far from Chiquimulilla, the ultimate goal of our project is to develop a community library. Tiquisate’s library began in the school and the community was allowed access to it. Eventually, the school library was insufficient to serve the developing needs of the community, and the community library was built largely through grassroots efforts. Along these same lines, the library at CES is being developed as a community resource, as well as for the school. It is encouraging that the school has opened the doors of the library to parents and other community members.

Research supports models of libraries that serve multiple functions. Combined libraries are viable options for developing countries, where resources for public buildings are often scarce (Knuth, 1994). Combined libraries in developing countries serve three important purposes: “1 – to

provide information necessary for rural development; 2 - to support education programs by providing materials; and 3 - to serve as centers for community education and culture" (Kagan, 1982). This combination of purposes is at the heart of this McMaster project and reflects the Westendorff's aspirations for providing the educational tools that will enable the students at CES to develop their skills that will contribute to the development of Guatemala.

The road from illiterate to literate is a long and complex one. The best way to start is simply to put one foot in front of the other. The installation of a school library at CES is more than a first step. There is now a structure, resources, and curriculum for developing the literacy skills and intellectual talents of children where none existed two years ago. What better way to advance humanity than by providing the tools for a people to advance themselves?

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