

## **LITERACY EDUCATION IN GUATEMALA: THE CHALLENGE OF RESOURCES**

Emily Meyer, McMaster Scholar

Not only is illiteracy a prevalent problem in the rural parts of Guatemala, but the lack of resources sets limitations on the progress of literacy programs. The 2007 McMaster trip to Chiquimulilla, Santa Rosa, Guatemala, focused on the opening of a school library at Colegio Evangelical Shaddai (CES). The long-term goal of establishing this library is to eventually grow it into a community library. The McMaster Learning Community's contribution was to begin to build a library of reading resources for the teachers, students, and community members in Chiquimulilla. One important initiative of the project was the creation of teaching tools and materials that would allow the school and community members to maximize the benefit of their new library resource. The following questions guided the research for this initiative:

- 1 – What is the importance of emphasizing reading in the primary grades?
- 2 – How can teachers incorporate reading into their classroom activities?
- 3 – Will the availability of materials create motivation and enthusiasm to read?

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Reading is one of the most important skills that teachers can equip their students with, and this skill should be taught the moment children begin attending school. According to Barone (2006), "Reading and writing achievement in the primary grades provide the critical foundation for a child's future academic success." Being able to read not only affects students' academic accomplishments, but it also has an effect on their ability to function effectively in society. Learning to read and write is critical to a child's success in school and later in life. One of the best predictors of whether a child will function competently in school and go on to contribute actively in our increasingly literate society is the level to which the child progresses in reading and writing. Although reading and writing abilities continue to develop throughout one's life, the years from birth through age eight are the most important period for literacy development (NAYEC & IRA, 1998).

Reading is a skill that requires much attention and continual practice. The amount of time teachers devote to reading instruction and practice is essential for their student's literacy development, especially in the early grades. "The research literature strongly suggests that the total amount of reading done in the beginning stages of learning to read has a powerful

effect on reading achievement” (Moore, 2005). Engaging students in a print-rich environment, with many opportunities to access books, is critical because students can then begin to learn why understanding the meaning and uses of language is necessary to effective communication with others. According to the NAEYC and the IRA Reading Panel (1998), children need regular and active interactions with print. Specific abilities required for reading and writing come from immediate experiences with oral and written language. Experiences in these early years begin to define the assumptions and expectations about becoming literate and give children the motivation to work toward learning to read and write. From these experiences, children learn that reading and writing are valuable tools that will help them do many things in life.

The more encounters students have with print, the better able they are to understand that language will play a significant role in their own lives. One of the benefits of reading consistently is that students encounter the same common words story after story, which builds a corpus of words that they can immediately recognize. “The implication of this finding is that there needs to be substantial time during the school day for students to engage in the reading of continuous text at their level” (Moore, 2005). The time a teacher spends reading to students also benefits other skills directly related to reading, such as vocabulary development and reading comprehension, which are imperative to becoming literate.

Through reading different genres and texts, students will begin to identify words that are often repeated. In the primary grades, one of the teachers’ goals should be for their students to recognize various sight words and high-frequency words. In order to achieve this goal, children need to be given the opportunity to read books and have books read to them. “Both theory and recent research confirm that many words are learned in the context of reading. Thus, one way to help students increase their vocabularies is to increase the amount of reading they do” (Moore, 2005). The amount of reading taking place in the classroom is positively correlated with an increase in vocabulary development; therefore, the more opportunities a teacher gives a student to read, the more likely the student will be to expand his or her vocabulary.

Reading aloud to the class is another way a teacher can enhance students’ vocabulary. Moore (2005) states, “Research suggests that an effective vocabulary program includes many opportunities for young students to hear high-quality literature read aloud.” Similarly, the NAEYC and IRA (1998) have found evidence that a child’s vocabulary increases through listening to stories coupled with a teacher’s explanation of the text. This technique can

also enhance the student's comprehension, another skill pertinent for reading progression.

Comprehension strategies are another component critical to literacy development. Reading individual words is an insignificant activity if the reader is unable to understand the storyline. The ability to grasp the meaning of a story can only be taught through consistently introducing different texts. According to Moore (2005), "All the instruction in the world will not make up for a lack of experience actually reading and applying strategies and skills taught." As teachers read aloud to the class, they can model effective comprehension tactics that will allow the children to see and hear the steps that they need to take in order to understand the text. This simple technique has a considerable effect on increasing students' capacity to comprehend increasingly more complex material. Modeling reading behavior and book reading facilitate a connection between the information in the text and the children's own experiences, which encourages them to talk about the book information (Manson, Peterman, & Kerr, 1998). When children begin to discuss the contents of the story or relate the plot with a similar circumstance that happened to them, they begin to utilize comprehension strategies. By exposing students to different literary genres and modeling comprehension techniques, teachers can significantly increase students' literacy.

Improvement in students' comprehension and vocabulary skills abilities depends greatly on the amount of time spent reading, which, in turn, depends upon the availability of reading materials. In poverty-stricken schools, the importance of reading becomes that much greater because the students do not have access to books or educational materials at home. "Children growing up in poverty, whether urban or rural dwellers, have a lot of school-related vocabulary learning to do to catch up to their more advantaged peers. In order to develop an adequate school-related vocabulary, some students may need many more opportunities to engage in vocabulary study early in preschool and kindergarten" (Moore, 2005). Teachers play a critical role in these schools because they are responsible for trying to bridge this literacy gap. Therefore, educators need to use reading as the groundwork of their curriculum, starting immediately in the primary grades.

A study done in the 1990s provides evidence that there can be a significant gap in literacy between middle-class children and those who live in poverty. Adams estimated that "by the time many middle-class children reached first-grade, they may have had between 1,000 and 1,700 hours of storybook reading, including many opportunities for talk and interaction around the books. . . . In contrast, some children living in poverty were found to

have as little as 25 hours of storybook experience” (Moore, 2005). The gap between the children’s literacy development was due to the disparity in reading opportunities they were provided. When children come to school, it is important for teachers to immerse them in a print-rich environment with story books, posters, and word walls, creating an atmosphere full of opportunities that nurture their reading development.

### **MAKING READING A PART OF THE CLASSROOM**

Research shows that reading in the classroom is extremely important, especially in the early grades. Although setting time aside for reading is key, it is equally important that educators understand the different methods for integrating reading within the curriculum. Reading aloud with follow-up activities, reading with motion, shared reading, partner reading, guided reading, and independent reading are all methods that teachers can use to incorporate reading into their daily schedule. These techniques showcase the importance of teachers to the reading process.

Reading aloud is generally one of the first methods teachers introduce to their students. According to the NAEYC and IRA reading panel (1998), “The single most important activity for building understanding and skills essential for reading success appears to be reading aloud to children.” Reading with



motion is another method used to promote children's interest in reading by giving movement to different stories. Reading with motion encourages children to create a drama based on the events in the story, create puppet characters, or make up actions that correspond with the text.

Shared reading is another important teaching method. This practice allows the teacher to model various early reading behaviors, such as moving from left to right, sounding out words, and starting conversations pertinent to comprehension of the text (Fountas & Pinnel, 1996). The reading material is positioned in a way that children can see the text and follow along. The teacher or student will point to the words as the class reads the text aloud together.

Partner reading is a method for children to practice their reading skills with others – usually with a more advanced reader. The NAEYC and IRA (1998) recommend a classroom library in order to encourage partner reading.

Guided reading is a method that promotes independent reading and allows the teacher to support the children as they read in a small group setting. The teacher guides the group's reading by asking questions about word meaning and pronunciation, discussing how to problem-solve unknown words, and asking the students to comment about the book's contents. It also allows for the development of reading strategies fundamental to independent reading and gives children enjoyable, successful experiences in reading for meaning (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). This method sets the stage for independent reading.

Independent reading gives children the opportunity to read on their own. Whether a student can read or not, it is important that educators allow sufficient time for independent reading to take place in their classroom. According to Fountas and Pinnell (1996), “[I]ndependent reading provides opportunities to apply reading strategies independently, and builds confidence through sustained, successful reading.”

Good reading skills lay the groundwork for students' future success in school. Through teachers' efforts to enhance students' reading skills and their enthusiasm for reading, every student can be inspired to become literate. It is important, then, to provide teachers with the resources and training to more effectively help their students to become strong readers.

## **READING IN GUATEMALA**

In order to complement the larger work of establishing a school library, the project I implemented focused on providing a guide for using the books. I created a reading methods binder that highlighted the various reading strategies outlined above for the primary grades. For each method, I provided a basic overview, the values and benefits of using it, and a classroom set-up that shows how to apply it. Suggestions for specific books and examples of how to use the book in the classroom were included along with lesson plans and worksheets for the teachers and students. Each book I chose as the sample for the reading methods was both culturally and developmentally appropriate.

I presented my reading methods binders to each teacher individually along with 79 children's books to be placed in the new library. With the help of a translator, I explained the different reading methods and why these strategies were important to use in the classroom. I clarified any questions educators had and walked them through the lesson plans and activities that I provided for their specific classroom. Many of the teachers responded enthusiastically to the materials.

The following day I was invited to observe three teachers in their classrooms. Each used a different strategy that was designed to engage their students with the material that they were reading. The first-grade teacher asked me to demonstrate and read aloud in his classroom so he could observe what the reading method entailed. With the help of our translator, I was able to read the book and ask the students questions pertaining to the text. As he read the book aloud to the children, I would tell him questions to ask about the text. Some questions asked the students to predict what was going to happen using the illustrations, while others simply put the children in the character's shoes. I was able to demonstrate effective teaching strategies, as well as learn how the teachers at the school were employing different teaching strategies.

## **REFLECTION**

During recess one afternoon, I brought out a book into the middle of the courtyard to see what the children would do. To my delightful surprise, students of all ages joyously surrounded me; they wanted to read and learn on their recess break! Their reaction to this situation showed me that the children are definitely motivated and enthusiastic about enhancing their literacy skills, but the lack of resources set limitations on their progress. Now with their new school library, the children are able to completely immerse themselves in a virtual sea of children's books. Teachers can use books as classroom resources, the younger students can take books home to share

with their families, and the older students can research various topics, all in this new haven known as the library -- where literacy comes alive. As a future educator of young children, I was able to learn from many of my experiences in Guatemala. As I thought about all the learning that can take place from a book, I realized what students at CES were missing. How could students become excited about learning to read when they did not have any books? How can a child be motivated to become literate when there are not any resources to nurture and develop this skill? Now with a library of books, these students have access to the resources they need in order to learn how to read.

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