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# An International Professional Development Collaboration in Literacy Education

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## **An International Professional Development Collaboration in Literacy Education**

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*An International Professional Development Collaboration in Literacy Education* is a report of an international professional development project in Guatemala designed to improve literacy instructional practices and thereby raise student achievement in reading and writing. The opportunity for coaching Guatemalan teachers in teaching literacy strategies and skills provides data for this participatory action research study. This research is intended to contribute to cross-cultural understanding by graduate and undergraduate students in literacy,

improved pedagogical techniques, international outreach in developing countries, and student academic success worldwide.

## **Background**

According to the extant research literature, there are important and positive consequences for students when teachers participate in effective professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Learning First Alliance, 2000; National Reading Panel, 2000; Rosemary, Roskos, & Landreth, 2007; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Therefore, improvement in student achievement depends upon the preparation of a generation of teachers who are proficient in the fields in which they teach, well versed in the latest pedagogical theories and practices, and professionally mentored. As literature about international activism for social justice in literacy education is largely uncharted, the study expands on work done in the US with culturally and linguistically diverse students from marginalized populations (Pepper-Sanello, 2009; Pepper-Sanello & Sosin, 2009; Pepper-Sanello, Sosin, Buttaro & Eichenholtz, 2009; Pepper-Sanello, Sosin, Eichenholtz & Buttaro, 2009). As social justice-minded teacher educators, an important aspect of our research agenda is to infuse curriculum with social justice ideals that increase involvement in collaborative actions on behalf of populations where literacy can empower democratic initiatives (Linné, Benin, Sosin, 2009; Pepper-Sanello, Sosin, Zucaro & Rainbow, 2008; Sosin & Pepper-Sanello, 2008; Sosin, Pepper-Sanello, Eichenholtz, Buttaro & White-Clark, 2009).

In Latin America, developing countries are struggling to build effective educational institutions. The literacy rate in Guatemala in 2000 was 69%, which

compares poorly with the rest of Latin America (Lora, 2008). Research in 2006 by Willms (cited by Lora, 2008), finds in Latin America “an overwhelming number of schools concentrate low-income children, and in these schools the learning outcomes tend to be less favorable, with few but notable exceptions” (p.131). Today’s Guatemalan teachers were raised under a series of oppressive military governments engaged in the longest civil war in Latin American history (History of Guatemala, 2008). Guatemalan public elementary and secondary schools are free and compulsory up to sixth grade (Bureau of International Affairs, US Department of Labor, 2009). However, even though public schools are free, parents pay for uniforms, books, supplies, and transportation. As Ruano (2003) notes, the school system reifies the inequitable socioeconomic separation of classes in Guatemala. In order to improve education, the current Guatemalan government has initiated international contacts, one of which is with the International Reading Association (IRA).

IRA’s mission “to promote reading by continuously advancing the quality of literacy instruction and research worldwide” and IRA has a “Global Literacy Development Goal” to “Provide leadership on literacy issues around the world” which advocates literacy education in all nations, promotes coherent and sustainable literacy initiatives informed by local literacy leaders, and promotes reading and writing as lifelong habits and endeavors (IRA, 2008). The IRA affiliated Nassau Reading Council (NRC) founded an ongoing international project within Guatemala in 1989. For over the past twenty years, the Guatemalan Literacy Project (GLP) has supported Guatemalan teachers in their efforts to

develop and sustain the quality of literacy education and to build their democracy through the following initiatives: (1) donations of books and writing implements, (2) professional development for teachers, (3) hosting Guatemalan educators who visit the US, and (4) assisting in the creation of Guatemala's own Reading Council IRA affiliate organization, the Consejo de Letura de Guatemala (Cutts, 2001; Friedland, 2004; *IRA Reading Today*, 1992; *IRA Reading Today Council & Affiliate News*, 1996; Montiel, 2006; Sullivan & Glazer, 2006).

The Seventh International Literacy Conference was held in Guatemala City in February 2009. At the conference, university professors and literacy educators from the US and Canada presented workshops in which Guatemalan educators were able to link theory, materials, and literacy methods in engaging, hands-on activities (Pepper-Sanello, Zucaro & Rainbow, 2009).

### **Research Purpose**

When the Guatemalan Minister of Education extended an invitation to the NRC delegation to attend the Seventh International Literacy Conference, it afforded literacy teachers and professors from Adelphi University, New York, the opportunity to engage in action research. The team decided on three major purposes for study:

- To learn about Guatemalan teaching practices, instructional materials and resources and investigate issues that impact on Guatemalan literacy education through school visitation;

- To find effective approaches for international professional development in education (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1989; Zemelman, 2005); and
- To identify factors leading to social justice and democratic education and invoke knowledge of literacy's power to raise social consciousness of diverse perspectives (Freire, 1970; Villegas, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

### **Method**

Principles of teacher action research, naturalistic inquiry and qualitative methodology guided the formulation of research questions, data collection, and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Mills, 2003). Photos and videos were used to document the study. Visits to two public elementary schools in rural Guatemala and in the capital, Guatemala City provides data for this study. The *Classroom Environment Checklist* was used to record observations of environmental print, daily schedules, calendars or routine agendas, bulletin boards, word walls, classroom Rules/Consequences posters, job charts, temperature/weather charts, classroom libraries, literature response charts, and student work. In addition, furniture and its arrangement in the classrooms, the wardrobe closet, the teacher's desk, and the presence of computers or AV equipment, the national flag or other political references in the classrooms or auditorium were noted. Researchers interviewed informants regarding the use of learning centers and materials available for instruction. Observers recorded classroom interactions and how teachers managed classroom discipline. The *Teacher Survey of Literacy Practices & Materials* was used to determine literacy practices implemented in classrooms and to accommodate the needs of the

teachers in the professional development workshops. A *Professional Development Evaluation* survey was distributed at the end of each professional development workshop. Interpreters facilitated interviews with teachers and principals.

## **Results**

The presentation at the NERA conference included a movie composed of the photos taken of the two schools and at the conference. The poverty of Guatemala was apparent in the school buildings. The visited schools operate only during daylight hours because they are without electric lighting, and running water was available only outside the buildings. Children were seen herding cattle near the school. However, prior professional development interventions were apparent in one of the school's print-rich environment, as exemplified by graphic organizers on wall charts and cooperative learning group activities. However, rote memorization and photocopied worksheets, and cutting, pasting and coloring activities were also observed instead of authentic reading and writing activities. The classroom supplies of books seemed insufficient and not representative of the leveled classroom libraries common in US schools. The young children seemed content to play with hoops and other recreational equipment. Classrooms in the upper grades were separated by gender, with seating in straight rows. Students chatted happily with each other and were welcoming to guests; however there seemed to be little educational activity during the visit. Parents, sometimes in Mayan traditional garb, seemed to be engaged in ancillary activities such as cooking and obtaining supplies. The impression left on observers was that these schools would benefit from professional development intervention.

Evaluative feedback drawn from conference workshop questionnaires (N=11) showed that teachers appreciated the professional development (“I learned how to analyze a book and develop the children’s analysis”). The teachers discovered innovative ways to engage students (“I learned a new method to introduce them to reading and imagination”). Finally, they were grateful for their literacy professional development (“I love this work”).

### **Conclusions**

Limitations of this study result primarily from insufficient time in Guatemala, as snapshots and observations were constrained by the brief nature of classroom visits, and may not accurately reflect the actual circumstances or effectiveness of the instructional program (Patton, 2001). Also, the need for appropriate translation of the terminology used in literacy professional development from Spanish to English and vice versa became apparent when survey data was not validated by the practices observed. Finally, the international delegation’s visits were accompanied by armed guards, which may have been perceived as “political” and compromised teachers’ responses and researchers’ conclusions.

The greatest impact of the visits and interactions at the schools was the observers’ realization of the devastating consequences of poverty on Guatemalan school children. Yet schools that participate in partnership with the International Reading Association and the Nassau Reading Council appear to foster sustainable improvements in educational quality through literacy professional development. We will continue this research agenda with a planned trip to Guatemala in February 2010, during which time school visits and interactions with teachers will



further connect literacy practices in the US and Guatemala toward educational excellence.

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