

Community Literacy Journal

Volume 3
Issue 2 *Spring*

Article 3

Spring 2009

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Recommended Citation

Meyers, Susan V. "So You Don't Get Tricked: Counter-Narratives of Literacy in a Rural Mexican Community." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2009, pp. 19–35, doi:10.25148/clj.3.2.009467.

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SO YOU DON'T GET TRICKED: COUNTER-NARRATIVES OF LITERACY IN A RURAL MEXICAN COMMUNITY

Susan V. Meyers

A recent nine-month field study considered the relationships among school-sponsored and community forms of literacy practices in a migrant-sending area of rural Mexico. While many teachers in rural Mexico argue that students should remain in school rather than migrate to the U.S., this study demonstrates the ways in which schools in rural Mexico often do not recognize the needs of the communities that they serve. As a result, students in these schools often develop a pragmatic orientation toward formal literacy. While many of the skills that they learn help them navigate commercial and government bureaucracies, these students do not adopt the values embedded in formal education. Rather, they implicitly question the promise of education as a neutral means to social and economic mobility.

Gone to the Other Side: Migration as a Threat to Literacy Development

The teachers in Villachuato are frustrated. The desertion rate at their schools is high; and those students who continue studying beyond the secondary level are few. “The mentality of many of the young guys,” one teacher told me, “is [like this]: I can’t finish school—I’m going to the U.S. But they think that in the U.S. they’re going to have all this work, and make a lot of money. And that they’re going to have big trucks and things. . . . That’s the dream they have.” Indeed, migration (often illegal) is such a huge phenomenon in Villachuato and similar towns in central western Mexico that migration patterns affecting labor and education trends have likewise attracted attention in the U.S. (see related work by Katherine Richardson Bruna and Mark Grey). Traditionally, the bulk of U.S.-bound migration from Mexico has come from the state where Villachuato is located, Michoacán, and its neighboring states of Guanajuato and Jalisco (Cardoso 2). “Migration is a really big problem here,” the secondary school director in Villachuato told me. “For the kids, more than anyone. It affects us by means of desertion . . . It makes them lose interest in school. They think that they just want to finish secondary school, and convince their parents, and go to the other side.” In this way, the teachers of Villachuato complain that students and families don’t value formal education, and they identify transnational migration as the principal threat to literacy development in the area.

On the U.S.-side of the border, the literate experiences of Mexican-origin students are likewise gaining attention because of rising student numbers (Reyes and Halcón 2) and increasingly heated political debates (Gonzalez xxvii). Similar to Mexican teachers’ concerns, anti-immigration sentiments in the U.S. have long complained of Mexicans’ lack of commitment to education. In 1825, Joel Poinsett, the first U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, bemoaned the state of Mexican

schools, noting that the “evils” existing in Mexico “would be greatly mitigated by education” (Poinsett 13). More recently, economist Thomas Sowell complained in 1981 that “The goals and values of Mexican Americans have never centered on education” (Sowell, cited in Valencia and Black 82). Such sentiments seem to be validated by low literacy levels among rural Mexican communities (Santoyo, Personal Communication), a phenomenon that facilitates arguments about how these students are not being socially responsible and are not taking full advantage of their resources (Bernal 110). In this way, students are often blamed for their own relative failures.

However, much less attention has been given to questions of *why* these relative failures exist. In her research of Mexican-origin families living along the Texan border, Guadalupe Valdés concluded that students and their families aren’t motivated by what public education has to offer. Further, her research suggests that the value that Mexican-origin students place on literacy and education isn’t *less* so much as *different* from mainstream American values (170). What these critiques imply, then, is a misunderstanding of literate values within given communities *on both sides* of the U.S.-Mexican border. That is, neither Mexican nor U.S. educators and politicians seem to fully understand the life conditions—and commensurate values—of rural Mexican communities: the communities from which the bulk of U.S.-bound migration comes. Implications of these misunderstandings include false assumptions about students, and poor strategies for motivating them (Reyes and Halcón 13). My study attempts to correct these assumptions by considering one rural Mexican community’s interface with formal literacy practices. In this article, I demonstrate the extent to which literate values in Mexico have been shaped by long-standing social and political exploitation, and the ways in which local agents have developed means of resistance to and subversion of dominant literate modes. Specifically, I argue that these community members value formal education not for its link to economic opportunity, but as a marker of social status. In order to set up this analysis, I begin with a description of the town’s history, before moving into a historical overview of public education in Mexico. From there, I describe teachers’ attitudes in Villachuato in more detail, as well as the contrasting approaches and values of Villachuato citizens. Finally, I end with a consideration of the implications of these findings on U.S. educators, including a brief summary of possible pedagogic strategies.

Shifting Sponsors: A Framework for Comparisons of Literacy

A community literacy perspective is valuable in an analysis of rural Mexican public education because research in community literacy typically considers the ways in which community members interface with larger institutions that control literacy. While broad calls for localized accounts of literacy practices have recently been made (Prus, ctd. in Guerra 2), many such accounts fail to adequately contextualize their findings. That is, while local level expansion remains important within the broad field of literacy studies, we need to avoid simply cataloguing local practices without considering the ways in which they are influenced by larger “autonomous” forms of literacy (Street 80).

Otherwise, we won't truly understand the full picture of those local agents' experiences—experiences which may surprise many U.S. educators and/or challenge our expectations. Ellen Cushman, for instance, has identified ways in which disadvantaged individuals successfully navigate government systems of state aid and learn to “talk” effectively within them (105). In a similar vein, I am interested not in describing new manifestations of literacy at the local level, but rather local reactions to dominant forms of literacy. I want to see, for example, how people, usually with less social and political power, react to, incorporate, resist, and/or adapt themselves to forms of literacy that are delivered to their home communities in the form of, for instance, public school and curriculum.

Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell argue that part of the answer to questions like mine lies in the dynamic of curriculum design and implementation, which often betrays what they call an “urban bias.” This bias, they explain, is founded on a belief in the superiority of urban lifestyles to rural ones, especially with respect to economic expansion. Our impulse, they argue, “is to ‘modernize’ the rural population by bringing them into line with the technological, economic, and cultural systems of urban life . . .” (26). Indeed, Linda King agrees that rural communities—including those in Mexico—become pressured to adopt universal literacy practices largely because of their proximity to urban centers, which educate citizens in order to better organize commercial activity (King 108). However, as Harvey Graff reminds us, the coexistence of universal literacy and economic growth does not necessarily mean that the former *causes* the latter (344). Rather, it has been shown that infrastructures for formal literacy often emerge *after* a period of economic expansion, rather than *before* it (Schmelkes, ctd. in King 17).

In order to consider this movement of rural citizens to urban centers—or, conversely, of urban curriculum to rural schools—Deborah Brandt's examination of the growth of mass literacy is helpful. In her analysis, Brandt traces the movement of literacy from rural communities to urban centers during the early part of the twentieth century (74), and she likewise traces qualitative shifts in literacy. These latter changes occur, Brandt argues, along with changes in literacy “sponsors”: the social institutions that fund and organize literacy and, in so doing, define it ideologically (21). The first of these sponsors that she identifies in U.S. history is religion; and religious sponsorship, she argues, lent a moral imperative to the spread of literacy. In this way, the earliest U.S. ideologies of education cast it as a means of shaping morally upright individuals. In my own work in Mexico, I have recognized the same pattern because of the colonialist influence of the Catholic Church (Kobayashi 3). Further, in both the U.S. and Mexico, this early moral imperative later became utilized, and politicized, as a second phase of literacy sponsorship emerged: that of the state (Brandt 28).

Under state-sponsored public education in both countries, public schools then became a means of forming fine, upstanding citizens; in return, citizens from both the U.S. and Mexico were promised increased economic opportunities through education. In Mexico, however, this promise was left

largely unfulfilled; and rural community members have become wary of the professed potential of education to improve their life chances. In Villachuato, for instance, school access has steadily increased since the early twentieth century, but economic opportunities have not. Therefore, the community has shifted its sights on something else: education's link to power and prestige, or what Pierre Bourdieu would call *cultural capital*. As Bourdieu explains, cultural capital consists of general knowledge (e.g. music, art, history) that suggests a person's social standing. Moreover, Bourdieu believes that formal education "contributes to the reproduction and distribution of cultural capital and . . . of the structure of social space" (19). Similarly, while the participants of my study recognize the limitations of public education to propel them economically forward, they likewise sense the power implicit in education as a marker of social standing and prestige.

Methodology: A Reflexive Critical Ethnography

Data collection for this project was conducted over a nine-month period from August 2007 – May 2008. During this time, I lived as a researcher in the rural community of Villachuato in the Mexican state of Michoacán. Villachuato itself is a small *rancho* that is part of a larger municipality seated in the town of Puruandiro, about thirty minutes away by bus. Because most students in this region—indeed, the bulk of students arriving in U.S. classrooms from Mexico—are part of this system that usually caps out after ninth grade, I placed most of my attention on the secondary level, such that my data would reflect the maximum level of formal education that a student from this area could usually expect to obtain. Further, in order to temper my data, I visited two schools: the single secondary school in Villachuato, and one of two public secondary schools in Puruandiro. In order to couch this data, I likewise conducted observations and interviews at the Villachuato primary school, and the technical high school in Puruandiro, where a fortunate few youth from Villachuato go to continue their studies. In total, I visited some seventy-five language arts classes, and I likewise conducted a series of sixty-five semi-formal interviews with a variety of participants: students, parents, former students, teachers, and administrators. Beyond this work, I consulted town histories and textual materials from the secretary of education. While these materials were meager, they did help me to construct an understanding of the town and the way that it operates now and did in the past. Finally, in my analysis, I follow James Clifford's advice that the only way to process ethnographic data is to be self-reflexive (34). As part of this process, I have consistently had to question my own reactions to things—both responses to physical phenomena, as well as the differing opinions that I heard from the community, and the teachers who work—but do not reside—there. Of these, it has been interesting to me to note the ways in which I myself have changed as I consider my priorities as a teacher. Because, as I will show in the following analysis, the assumptions and goals that we, as teachers, bring to the classroom are not always those that most effectively represent the lives of our students.

Villachuato: The Formation (and dissolution) of a Mexican Town

The history of the site itself is important in several crucial ways. For as long as it has been in existence, Villachuato has been a site of oppression and exploitation. Founded as a Spanish-owned hacienda in the mid-1600s, Villachuato held its employees in slave-like conditions for nearly three hundred years. Following the Mexican Revolution, land reverted to the town's citizens, but the promise of land and liberation was an ironic one: Because land had been awarded to the citizens without the tools to work it, it took several decades before most families were able to establish reliable farms to sustain themselves. Ninety-nine-year-old Esperanza, the town's oldest inhabitant, explained:

No, we didn't have the tools, yet, to work the land. No, it was better for them to plant in the *cerro* [the shared hill]. Planting their corn [just like they used to]. It wasn't until later that they started planting the lands.

[And how did that happen? How did they start?]

Well, once they started to have enough money to buy things . . . They bought the materials . . . Yeah, little by little, they got together the money, so that they could go buy the necessary tools for planting. Here there wasn't anything like tractors or anything—nothing, nothing like that. And if you if you didn't have your two horses, and hook them together with the plow.

This struggle to work the land following the Revolution is an important part of the town's legacy because the theme of half-empty promises is longstanding in Villachuato. Later on, as schools have opened up in the area, teachers likewise promise students that, if they study, they will be able to improve their lives. However, because there is no employment in Villachuato beyond work on the family farm, higher levels of education do not translate into better lives—unless students are willing to leave their home communities. Moreover, because of recent policy changes, those same family farms that were so difficult to establish eighty years ago are newly endangered as the effects of the NAFTA freetrade agreement have lowered prices on essential goods in Mexico (e.g. corn), causing the failure of countless family farms and forcing increasing numbers of young people across the border (Yúnez-Naude and Barceinas Paredes 228).

In this way, the legacy of oppression in Villachuato is two-fold. First, the area has long experienced the influence of outside forces and interests. Second, when improvements have been promised, they have been only partially fulfilled: land without tools, and schools without jobs. Given these conditions, it is understandable why the people of Villachuato remain wary

both of outside influence and of the promise of supposedly liberated social and education policies. Throughout the town's existence, the townspeople have relied more on their own ingenuity for survival rather than the promised deliverance of others.

It Pains Me to Tell You This: Literacy Training in the New Nation

Historically, literacy has been delivered to rural Mexico by outside sponsors. Therefore, the first important characteristic to consider in areas like Villachuato is that of literacy as an *external* entity: something brought from the outside and imposed on local communities. In its earliest stages, formal education in Mexico was controlled by the Catholic Church, with all of its missionary zeal and European influences (Kobayashi 3). Later on, emerging victorious from its revolutionary efforts, Mexico was finally independent of foreign influence, but it was a very diverse and disconnected nation. Therefore two of Mexico's principal needs following the Revolution were to develop an economic base and to unify a national consciousness. On both counts, education was an important medium that needed to be expanded—most notably in rural areas, where the majority of Mexicans still lived, and few schools existed. However, the more challenging pursuit, reports the Secretaria de Educación (Secretary of Education), or SEP, was the latter: “La conquista más difícil es la intelectual y moral de un pueblo entero . . . El secreto está en la educación de las masas populares y el factor principal en las escuelas normales . . .” [The most difficult conquest is that of the intellectual and moral fiber of the people. . . . The secret is in mass education, and the principal factor is the normal schools . . .] (Méndez 430). In this way, the SEP reveals its awareness of the power of education to unite a nation, and of the importance of a work force that is willing to deliver the latter's message.

The SEP found that workforce in its teachers—and it found the means of forming these teachers in a centralized system of normal schools. In this way, teachers became the evangelists for the “civilizing mission” of public education: they were trained under a specific orientation “to subordinate the three Rs to the betterment of rural life” (Rockwell 304). In rural areas in particular, these schools were important because they allowed people without prior access to formal teacher training to become professionalized. Moreover, given the geographic diversity of smaller communities, many of these schools were designed as boarding schools—a feature which had the added effect of removing students from their home communities long enough to reorient them towards a new value system (309). Indeed, as Bradley Levinson has explained regarding secondary education in rural Mexico, higher levels of education in Mexico require students to sacrifice the values and assumptions of their home community in exchange for a new identity based in the ideologies of the education system itself. This is, he argues, the real process of becoming an educated person: adjusting one's identity, rather than acquiring a certain set of skills or knowledge (Levinson 212). And in fact, the early literacy goals of rural normal schools in Michoacán and elsewhere were formative, rather than

comprehensive: “Más importante a la Escuela Normal el aspecto formativo que el informativo” [More important to a Normal School education is the formative aspect, rather than the informative] (Vela 6).

Evidence of the enduring nature of this process of identity transformation is suggested in the data that I drew from teachers working today in rural areas like Villachuato and Puruandiro. Among the teachers and administrators whom I interviewed at the primary through high school levels, all but two were from rural areas of Michoacán. One of the two urban origin teachers was from Morelia, an hour’s car ride from Villachuato; the other was a disgruntled high school teacher from Mexico City who, finding the countryside far from the rural paradise he had envisioned, spoke adamantly of leaving the area as soon as possible. The remaining teachers, then, were nearly all trained in the normal schools in rural areas of Michoacán, and many of them originated from Puruandiro and its surrounding *ranchos*. Further, many of these teachers were likewise the first in their families to become educated past the secondary level. For instance, the director of the secondary school in Puruandiro explained his three-year break between middle and high school: “[It was] because there were so many of us, and not very many resources. So, some of us got to study, and others of us had to rest. Once some of them had gotten through, they could

help the others.” Even more notable, however, is the fact that such professionals, once they did finally obtain their teacher training, began to identify more with the professionalized world than with their

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community of origin. The Puruandiro director, for instance, was among the first in his family to become educated. “My parents basically didn’t study,” he told me in a lowered voice during our interview:

In those times, it was very difficult to do so. My father has told me that he went to primary school, and didn’t quite finish. He just went to learn how to read and write, and that was sufficient. And my mother, the truth is it pains me to tell you this, but she doesn’t know how to read or write [laughs, embarrassed]. And we’re all professionalized [my siblings and I]. So, as you can see, she really worried about us—preparing us. Because she told us that her life experience was very difficult, and she wanted us to prepare ourselves for something better. To be able to defend ourselves. And the most important thing was to learn something.

The combination of shame and gratefulness with which this man relates his story suggests an important tension in his loyalties. On the one hand, he recognizes the hardships of his parents' lives, and he appreciates his mother's efforts to prepare her children for a better life. On the other hand, working as an educational leader, the director cannot shake his feelings of embarrassment regarding his illiterate parentage. Having built upon their own hopes for him, he has successfully elevated himself into a higher social level—a level which brings with it a new set of beliefs and assumptions. Just as this director, like so many other rural educators, believes that education is the best means to self-improvement, and he is likewise comfortable with the sense of loyalty that it demands of him. In this way, education is considered both personal fulfillment and social responsibility.

He Knows Beethoven: Teacher Expectations in Rural Mexico

Moreover, this orientation is apparent not only in rural educators' stories of their own training, but also in their discussions of students. Describing the hardships of students from Villachuato who pursue their education at higher levels, the secondary school director there admitted that:

I only know a few people who have their kids at the university in Morelia. Very few. Like four or five. And do you know what these kids do? They work—they work a lot. Waiters, shipping. All that. It's hard for them to study. That have to go and rent—they don't have houses. There are some student houses, and they're full of people. So, they go and they make a lot of sacrifices.

Even so, implicit in this school director's conversation with me was his belief that this kind of hard work and self-sacrifice is *how it should be*: we should make sacrifices for education, he believes, because it offers us a better life. In a related vein, another teacher explained to me that, despite ongoing hardships, there is much more hope for students now: "Well, the world is much more up-to-date now, you know. So it's not likely that kids will only go to primary school anymore. They're going to keep studying. And to get work. We have to study, right? To get work. To do better in life." Implicit in these descriptions is a belief in education as a neutral vehicle for social mobility. These teachers believe in education's power to spur economic advancement and personal fulfillment.

Because of this belief in the promise and importance of education, many teachers are dismayed by their students' lack of resolve. "I really think people lose something when, instead of looking for self-development or professionalization, they just look for more stuff," the Villachuato secondary school director told me. "They just want more stuff: I have this, so I want that and that. So instead of trying to improve themselves, they just try to increase the things that they have. They don't try to build themselves intellectually, or in terms of knowledge. They should try to learn more, try to improve things. But they just look toward having more and more things." Moreover, these

teachers and administrators are concerned about the negative effect that this apathy is having on the community itself. Because the people of Villachuato are not paying sufficient heed to the civilizing qualities of education, they claim that society is suffering:

The other thing is that migration changes our habits here. For instance, the issue of drugs. They bring back with them drugs, music, clothes . . . and the kids want to imitate them. And they do it. So, this is a new influence. Before, you didn't hardly see these things. Lifestyles that aren't our own—people are losing their identity. Instead of maintaining affection for their own land, they feel an empty space—and they leave.

This comment in particular harkens back to my previous arguments about the purpose of public education in Mexico following the Revolution: to unify the country through the realization of a national consciousness. Moreover, this unity and patriotism, as we have seen, depends on the process of producing educated persons who believe in the value of education—and, with it, the specific messages delivered through education. In this way, an influence, like transnational migration, that draws attention away from nationalist values is indeed a threat: not only to an individual's livelihood, but also to the moral character of the broader social fabric.

In contrast, the townspeople for whom teachers and administrators have the most respect are those who find their way—through whatever means—to education. One teacher explained:

There's [a] family [here in town]—they have a lot of kids. But they are doctors, dentists, engineers, architects. And almost all of them studied. Because the first one helps the rest. And they're all professional. . . . They have like a family strategy—they wanted all of their kids in school. And they have one in the U.S.—he must send money down to help them. And [the father of this family is] a really cultured man. He knows a lot—he knows about classical music. It's rare that you find a *campesino* like that. He knows Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, Ravel. And that's how it goes. He knows a lot about music—and other things, too. He's studied. So culturally, he knows a lot. He studies by himself—he learns it all just by reading. He comes and talks with us—and that's how I understood his cultural level. Because he comes around when classes aren't in session. . . . But there aren't many like that.

The suggestion here is akin to Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital: social knowledge that denotes prestige and social standing. That is, many of the teachers relate most to those members of the community who have found access to cultural capital, such as familiarity with Beethoven. However, as an

observer in both the community of Villachuato and language arts classes at the secondary school—many of which are still dominated by canonical texts—I became aware of the inconsistency between schooled knowledge and the physical and economic realities of Villachuato. Beethoven, for instance, has little to do with a life farming strawberries; as such, the liberal arts curriculum favored by several of the language arts teachers with whom I spoke is not directly useful to their students. Further, education itself is problematic in this area: because there are no jobs, the only option for students who do go on beyond the secondary level is to leave their home community permanently. Therefore, although so many of the teachers in Villachuato relate best to families who prize education—and, along with it, symbols of cultural capital—these families are losing their children in the same way as do those who send their sons north to work as migrants in the U.S. In either case, the means toward economic improvement for these children is complex.

So You Don't Get Tricked: Counter-Narratives of the Utility of Literacy

In contrast to teachers' beliefs and values, neither the assumptions of personal fulfillment nor social responsibility hold sway in Villachuato. Because the townspeople do not experience education as a reliable means of economic advancement, they are wary of it. Further, because education has been delivered to their community by larger, often exploitative influences, they do not feel any particular allegiance to it. What they do recognize, however, is the power of literacy: those who manage to accrue enough education—enough cultural capital—find themselves in more powerful social positions. As such, the people of Villachuato adopt basic literacy practices with a sense of pragmatism—and they continue to esteem formal education as an important marker of prestige and social success.

The problematic status of education in Villachuato is rooted in the fact that there is no industry and no available jobs. Therefore, even though schooled opportunities have risen steadily over the years since the Mexican Revolution, the skills that students learn in school have little direct bearing on their lives. Even the fact that the secondary school in Villachuato is zoned as a vocational school does not help. Because the school lacks sufficient resources, it is unable to offer curriculum in agriculture and animal husbandry that might be useful to its students. Further, in addition to the problem of relevant curriculum and the lack of jobs, education has long experienced considerable conflict in Villachuato. Corporeal punishment, for instance, was related to me in several interviews from participants in their twenties through seventies. “He was really good at hitting us,” one seventy-year-old woman described the first teacher in Villachuato. “When he didn't like one of the kids, he hit them a lot. He was really aggressive. It was bad. Because if you don't know something, and they don't tell you, how are you going to learn?” Moreover, she explained, it was typically those children who were poorer who got the brunt of things: “He was really fierce, especially with the kids that he didn't like. He treated

them bad. Because there were plenty of kids that he liked—oh, he was really nice to some of them. He didn't do anything to them. But [my siblings and I] had to go out and work the fields, so sometimes we missed class, and I think it was because of that that he didn't like us." In this way, the teachers in Villachuato value and reward a certain kind of knowledge: not that of working the fields, but that of schooled literacy. Those students in Villachuato whose families had the resources to send them to school every day fared well; the others did not. Therefore, because they lacked the financial resources to attend school consistently, and the cultural capital to know and address the appropriate school curriculum, these children were punished. A woman now in her late twenties explained to me how this kind of corporeal punishment and shaming practices are still being used in Villachuato's schools: "Well, they did, you know, pull your ears, you know, if you got an answer wrong ... I only got my ear pulled once. And oh, I got so embarrassed."

Given these negative experiences, it is not surprising that the school desertion rate in Villachuato is high. In the age bracket of parents now in their forties and upward, for instance, the average level of completed schooling is third or fourth grade; those parents who finished primary school speak of it with pride. Moreover, for those who did remain in school, resources were sparse, and learning outcomes were low. "I don't really think we had books," one woman related. "I don't remember. I mostly remember how they made us work on the *tablas*, to practice math. Nothing else. I don't remember much how they taught us. I learned to read and write a little, but not much. Like adding and multiplying and dividing—I don't know any of that. Well, adding things up, a little bit. But multiplying and dividing, no, not at all." However, despite these relative gaps in learning, what interests me most is not what these participants don't know so much as what they *do* know. For instance, although the woman cited above reports low levels of mathematical ability, she likewise understands what the next levels of study would be, and how they might be applied. More importantly, the participants in this study in general provided anecdotes and opinions that suggest that they understand the broader power systems at play in formal literacy practices. That is, although they may not have much cultural capital of their own, they recognize what such capital is, where it comes from, and the importance of it to their lives.

This broad awareness of *what* official literacy is and *why* it might be useful contributes to a counter-narrative about literacy that stands in marked contrast to the teachers' narratives of self-fulfillment and success. Rather than characterizing formal education as a practice that leads to personal fulfillment, the citizens of Villachuato recognize the importance of literacy as a pragmatic tool to be acquired and manipulated. Moreover, as has been noted elsewhere (Seitz 79, King 106) this tool is particularly important as a means of self-defense. For instance, when I asked middle school students about the purpose of going to school, their answers were both pragmatic, and indicative of an understanding of the darker, more exploitative aspects of life. "Why do people go to school?" I asked. "So they can learn, and so that they don't get treated badly," one student answered. Another student, even more astute, told

me: “Because when you go to look for a job, so that they don’t trick you. You have to be able to read the contract.” In this way, students, even at the seventh grade level, demonstrate an understanding of the pragmatic importance of formal literacy to economic survival. It is important to learn how to read, one student told me:

Because reading is when . . . like for instance, if you go to a meeting. . . . But sometimes people don’t want to, because they don’t know how to read and write. And if you can read, you can go and understand things. And writing, well that’s the same. Write things that are important. Like if you have to go and sign for official papers, or sign at the bank to get your money. Well, they give you a paper, and you have to sign it. And . . . sometimes people don’t know how.

However, even while students in Villachuato spoke much more about literacy as a means of self-defense rather than of economic advancement, they were likewise aware of its power. Interestingly, when I asked middle school students what they wanted out of life, many of them responded with specific careers: doctors, teachers, engineers. While I suspect that these particular answers reflected what the students believed that I, as a U.S. researcher, wanted to hear, I was more interested by a related pattern of answers that I received. Several of the students, both past and present, talked about how they wanted

While the reality in Villachuato is that education does not lead directly to financial opportunities, it does elevate a person’s cultural capital, such that he or she take on more social power.

to continue pursuing education (often in spite of the fact that, financially, they couldn’t) because they wanted to *become somebody*. While none of the participants explicitly explained what they meant by this, their yearning for

the prestige that accompanies formal education suggests a sharp understanding that education is the force in life that raises a person’s social standing. Moreover, one particular parent’s response sent this message home for me. “Sure I want my kids to go to college,” he told me. “I want them to be professionalized. So they can get to do what they want, you know? So they can call the shots.” Clearly, this parent has made an important realization about the value of formal literacy: While the reality in Villachuato is that education *does not* lead directly to financial opportunities, it does elevate a person’s cultural capital, such that he or she take on more social power. And it is this kind of power that makes the real difference: not the ability to simply apply for a job but to develop enough clout so that one can direct one’s own life, rather than be exploited, as so many generations in Villachuato have been. This, then, is the promise of formal education in Villachuato: Parents hope that their children will be able to “call the shots”: not simply to be able to defend themselves from exploitation, but to become active social and political actors themselves.

Conclusion: Implications for U.S. Teachers

Working as U.S. educators with immigrant students, we need to be aware not only of the country, language, and school curriculum from which these students come, but likewise the pattern of experiences that is common within their communities. In the case of Villachuato, the legacy of oppression, resistance, and self-reliance causes students and their families to become wary of education, and to identify alternative values about it. Indeed, when educators don't recognize these values, Guadalupe Valdés reminds us, they fail to reach students (172). Further, given our own academic successes, we may assume that education is a stable vehicle for self-improvement. However, this assumption doesn't meet with the realities of rural communities in Mexico, for example, nor does it reflect a critical view of what literacy actually is and does. This study has shown that citizens of Villachuato do not embrace formal education in part because it does not meet the immediate needs of their lives and in part because it has historically been an exploitative influence. For example, while teachers have embraced the nationalizing project that is the foundation of state-sponsored public education in Mexico, Villachuato citizens remain wary, taking the parts of formal literacy that suit them and leaving the rest. More importantly, where they value education, it is as a marker of prestige and power, rather than as a direct means to economic advancement.

Both these students' suspicion of schools and their real-world needs for training in the practical tools of agricultural production and/or migration survival throw into question many educators' beliefs about what literacy is and does. Villachuato students' awareness that schools can become vehicles of oppression debunks the model of education as a neutral meritocracy. Further, because communities like Villachuato need training in farming techniques, travel survival skills, and bureaucratic negotiation, many teachers' training in liberal arts curriculum may not be the most helpful to their students. However, I do not mean to suggest that such students either do not care about or are not deserving of the kinds of curriculum that often lead to college-level studies. Rather, I am advocating increased attention to community backgrounds and needs in order to create bridges in curriculum that will highlight students' lives and use their collective resources in order to help them reach their individual goals.

As such, I support pedagogical approaches similar to the Funds of Knowledge model described by Luis Moll, which draws from students' family and cultural backgrounds as important bases of knowledge (444). Under Moll's model, teachers sometimes become researchers by visiting students' homes or community centers and interviewing family members about their background and interests. Alternatively, students themselves can act as researchers by offering such information to classroom conversations. Through either means, students' cultural backgrounds are integrated into school curriculum in positive ways. The benefits of such work, Moll explains, include legitimatizing the cultural backgrounds of minority students and preventing educators from attempting to "save" students by converting them to an entirely new set of cultural values (445). Rather, through a Funds of

Knowledge approach, the issues that are more pressing on students become common material for discussion in the classroom. Therefore, students can begin to take more ownership of their education, and their motivation will likely increase as they are able to create bridges between their personal backgrounds and the more traditional aspects of formalized schooling.

In the context of students like those from Villachuato, a Funds of Knowledge type approach would ideally include a focus on students' experiences in their home communities; the introduction of analytic tools to help them make sense of these experiences, particularly as they come into contact with new cultural influences in the U.S.; and an attentiveness to the kinds of bureaucratic documents and protocols that they will likely encounter in schools, jobs, and government agencies. First, teachers who work with students from diverse backgrounds can benefit from gathering descriptive information about their students' home lives. For instance, one of the teachers whom I met during my field research told me that she always begins her classes in the fall by asking students to draw pictures of their families. From these pictures, she gathers a sense of which children have both parents at home and which are more likely to have stable home lives. Because of the high rate of out-bound migration in the area, particularly of men, many children in the schools in Villachuato do not have fathers living at home.

In a related vein, teachers in the U.S. could employ similar non-invasive descriptive means of gathering information about their students' home lives. Second, because social roles are fairly conservative in areas of rural Mexico like Villachuato, students' own experiences may provide important examples for analysis. Another teacher whom I interviewed in the area told me that she often engages her students in debates about the relationship between men and women, particularly with regard to birth control, age differences in marriage, public drinking, etc. She reported to me that these discussions were much more lively and meaningful to her students than some of the programmed curriculum about canonical texts. Quite often, she said, the students told her that they had never had the chance to think critically about these issues, or to consider the kinds of married relationships that they would like to have in their own lives. Third, as my data has already shown, students in Villachuato typically take a pragmatic approach to education. In an interview with a young woman living in the U.S. whose family immigrated from Villachuato several decades ago, I learned about the challenges that students in her situation face with regard to navigating social bureaucracies like schools. Because neither of her parents had finished primary school, they were unable to help her with school work or career planning; and because her high school guidance counselor refused to help her fill out the FAFSA form—telling her that she wouldn't be admitted to college anyway—she nearly missed her chance at a college education.

Emerging from this research project, I am shifting my own pedagogic orientation toward one that invites students' experiences into the classroom and encourages cross-cultural debate and analysis about these experiences. As a parallel to this collaborative and comparative dialogue, I likewise advocate a

pragmatic attention to social institutions: both how to function within them, and to critique them. If we want to reach minority and immigrant students, I believe that we need to begin both by understanding their backgrounds and by recognizing our own faulty assumptions about literacy. In both cases, we should try to better recognize literacy's role in social reproduction and social hierarchies. Finally, by taking a more candid look at formal literacy and by working more strategically and pragmatically, we may begin to help students utilize literacy in ways that make sense in the contexts of their own lives that will help them to indeed move forward.

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