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Mexican parents' and teachers' literacy perspectives and practices: construction of cultural capital

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Abstract

This article examines the relationships among the literacy practices engaged in by first-grade children and parents at home and the ways in which these practices are communicated, shaped, and fostered by teachers and administrators in two different sociocultural environments in urban Mexico. The differences observed between the home literacy experiences of children in a working class and a middle class community included transgenerational communication of assumptions regarding literacy and schooling, as well as attitudes associated with the parents' own school experiences. Class-based expectations on the part of teachers not only shaped interactions with parents, but were also reflected in the way the national curriculum was delivered, with a greater emphasis on rote skills and traditional reading instruction in the working class community. The authors argue that the school plays a role in the co-production of cultural capital in the home through its shaping of some of the literacy practices that children and families undertake.

Keywords

literacy practices; Latin America; home-school connections

Introduction

Recently the National Institute of Educational Evaluation (INEE) of Mexico released a study entitled *Aprendizaje y desigualdad social en México (Learning and Social Inequality in Mexico)*, which documented systematic disparities in Spanish and mathematics performance among Mexican students associated with the sociocultural conditions of the students (Backhoff et al. 2007). Examining children's school performance in light of families' academic cultural capital (*capital cultural escolar*), the authors found students from higher sociocultural levels outperformed their less advantaged peers in all areas, 'taking greater advantage of the learning opportunities offered by the schools' (Backhoff et al. 2007, 86).

Revisiting the concept of cultural capital

The concept of cultural capital, as proposed by Bourdieu (1977) over three decades ago as part of a theory of practice, 'consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture' (494). In the home, the sets of dispositions (*habitus*) which incline agents to act in particular ways are inculcated (Thompson 1991). Cultural capital is typically acquired quite unconsciously during the whole period of socialization

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(Bourdieu 1984), and includes the expected behaviors, language competencies, values, attitudes to and relationships with academic culture that are associated with bourgeois culture (Mills and Gale 2007). Bourdieu posited that it is through the institution of the school that dominant culture and the dispositions, attitudes, and linguistic codes associated with it are legitimized, thus contributing to the reproduction of the unequal distribution of societal advantages across social classes. Highly critical of the 'simplistic' way in which his work had been presented to English-speaking audiences, he contended that the schools contribute to, but do not reproduce in deterministic fashion, the distribution of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997). 'Because schools primarily reflect the knowledge and values of economically and culturally dominant groups in society, they validate and reinforce the cultural capital that students from such group already bring from home' (Nieto 2004, 312). Thus possession of cultural capital (by privileged families) and validation of that capital (through the schools) represent the process through which a family's socioeconomic status influences the children's eventual educational attainment and performance.

Over the years, researchers have sought to apply and test the cultural capital concept. Sullivan's (2001) study with students in their final year of compulsory schooling in England found that cultural capital was indeed transmitted in the home from parents to children, but that it provided only a partial explanation of class differentials in educational attainment. Dumais (2002) also found that cultural capital affected educational outcomes in a limited way, whereas *habitus* proved to be more predictive of students' grades. In their study comparing white and African American secondary school students, Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell (1999) concluded that cultural capital and educational resources did vary by racial group and only moderately predicted racial and social class gaps in performance. They described teachers as gate-keepers who rewarded the more affluent students with more attention and higher expectations, concluding that African American and low-SES students received a lower educational return based in part on the 'micropolitical evaluative processes at the school and classroom level' (158). In a complementary study, Lareau and Horvat (1999) closely examined interactions between parents and teachers, theorizing that the families' cultural and social resources became capital when they served to facilitate parents' interactions with dominant standards in school interactions. Within individual interactions, they identified moments of inclusion (or reproduction) when families were able to activate and draw on their cultural capital, and moments of exclusion (or contestation) when families were not able to activate the cultural capital that they might possess.

Reproduction theory, which is concerned with determination of the contributions of the educational system to the reproduction of the structure of power relationships in society (Bourdieu 1977), has been criticized for its overly deterministic nature and for its presentation of schools as monolithic entities, with the teachers serving as gate-keepers (albeit often inadvertently) to students' differential academic success. However, Sullivan (2001) noted the 'enormous decline in the status of the teaching profession' (910) in Great Britain and questioned portrayals of teachers as a cultural elite who are prejudiced against non-elite pupils. In their description of schooling for indigenous children in rural communities in Argentina, Borzone de Manrique and Rosemberg (2000) found that although the indigenous Colla children participated in an oral culture and entered school without experience with reading and writing, this did not disadvantage them in school because of the low level of literacy development and the few text materials provided by the school. They concluded that the fact that a fracture is not created between the schools in the Colla communities and the home itself has severe consequences for the children's access to the literate culture. These studies suggest that variation in the contexts of schooling (beyond the structural inequalities cited in the INEE study described above), and in particular in the connections between home and school, may contribute to differential performance outcomes for children associated with social class status.

Parental involvement in their children's schooling

A number of scholars and researchers in education have pointed out the importance of the relation between school and families (Alvarez 1999; Bolívar 2006; Caspe, Lopez, and Wolos 2007; La Casa 1997; Sénéchal 2006). In different countries in Latin America, school reform has shown concern for parent involvement with schools for the benefit of children's education (Martiniello 1999). However, for parents as well as teachers, it is not clear what this relationship involves, and the expectations of the role that each holds for the other are multiple and different.

In most schools in Latin America, parent participation focuses on organizing and participating in fund raising activities to acquire materials and equipment for classrooms or for the improvement of the physical conditions of the school. Schools also conduct informational meetings for parents. However, the literature on education points to the importance of a different kind of involvement. Martiniello (1999) described the variety of functions and roles that parents perform in their interaction with school and the different results in terms of learning opportunities for their children. She summarized four types of parental involvement: (a) parents viewed as responsible for child rearing and the school in charge of formal education; (b) parents as educators supporting and helping children at home with homework; (c) parents as agents providing support to the school and helping the school to improve services and material conditions; and (d) parents empowered with agency for educational decisions, that is, as part of committees affecting school and educational policies. These types, although different in the quality, degree, and extent of parental involvement in schools, all seem to a certain extent unidirectional; parents are involved with the school, but not necessarily the school with parents.

A different approach developed by Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti (2005) known as 'funds of knowledge' is one that they distinguish from the more typical parent participation programs. In this approach the goal is for teachers and schools to recognize parents' strengths, resources and experiences in defining pedagogical characteristics. Their emphasis is on giving voice, representation and authenticity to families in ways that can help teachers and children make learning more meaningful, providing a bridge that facilitates children's knowledge construction. In other words, they propose a change in perspective of the role of teachers, not as conveyers of educational information, but as educators 'with a theoretical perspective that seeks to understand the ways in which people make sense of their everyday lives' (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005, xi).

The present study uses data collected in two very different sociocultural environments in a large metropolis in Mexico to examine the relationships among the literacy practices engaged in by children at home and the ways in which these practices are communicated, shaped, and fostered by teachers and administrators in the first year of elementary school. We view literacy practices in which families engage as including not only the observable literacy events, or activities involving use of text, but also the cultural values, attitudes, feelings, and relationships that shape and give meaning to those events (Barton and Hamilton 2000; Street 2000). Of particular interest in this study is the role of the school in the production of cultural capital in the home through its shaping of at least some of the literacy practices that children and families undertake, particularly those associated with literacy instruction and development. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What characterizes the relationships between parents and teachers around literacy instruction in the two communities?
2. What literacy practices, particularly instructional literacy practices, are carried out in homes in the two communities, and how are these informed by parents' attitudes

and values (developed in part through interactions with teachers and the school's curriculum)?

Methods

The present study is part of a longitudinal study of literacy and oral language development among 360 children in grades 1 through 3 in four public schools in a large metropolis in Mexico. The authors form part of an international team carrying out the study. Reese, a former bilingual teacher in the US and teacher of English in South America, has conducted studies of home-school connections among immigrant Latino families in the US. Mejía Arauz focuses her research on cognitive development in social contexts, with an emphasis on informal and peer-focused learning opportunities both within and outside of school. She has worked with children attending José Morelos School on studies of situated learning. Ray Bazán is the former coordinator of a university-sponsored learning center in the community of one of the study's other participating schools.

The analyses in this paper focus on the experiences of first grade students in two of the schools, which were selected to represent contrasting socioeconomic conditions in the surrounding communities. Both schools are public, following the national curriculum and utilizing the approved national textbooks; however, the socioeconomic status of the two communities is markedly different.

José Morelos School (pseudonym) is located in a predominantly working class area on the outskirts of the city. It is a recently refurbished school located in a community with historic roots in the pre-Columbian past, where the local Catholic church building dates from the eighteenth century and where the inhabitants still refer to their community as a *pueblito*, or small town. On the edge of the community several American-based assembly plants (*maquiladoras*) are located, providing employment for local families, including unprecedented workplace opportunities for women. These plants require their employees to have at least a secondary school education, thus promoting changes in families with respect to the level of schooling they would like their children to achieve. Formerly an isolated indigenous town, this community has been incorporated into the metropolitan area through the rapid urban expansion of the past few decades.

Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez School is in a predominantly middle class *colonia* (neighborhood) of the city. The residential areas are quiet, comprising primarily two-story single-family homes with enclosed gardens and carports in front. The *colonia* is transversed by several major commercial thoroughfares, where businesses range from small shops to larger banks and mini-supermarkets. Cyber cafés, internet services, computer stores, and stationary stores are common, as are private academies offering classes in dance, drawing, and gymnastics.

For the present study, the co-authors carried out community observations together, noting uses and availability of textual materials, both formal and informal, in the different settings, Mejía Arauz and Ray Bazán also carried out over 40 hours of classroom observation, documenting instructional strategies and student participation during Spanish language and reading instruction.

Currently in Mexico, finishing *secundaria* (grade 9) is the mandatory level of schooling, although there is no form of control nor legal consequences if this is not accomplished. In the complete sample of families from all four participating schools, the average number of years of schooling for mothers was 9.59 and for fathers was 9.68 (mean parent education = 9.37 years). However, there were striking and significant differences in the level of parent education by neighborhood and school. Parents in the predominantly middle class

neighborhood (Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez) averaged 13.4 years of schooling, while parents in the working class community (José Morelos) averaged 6.7 years.

Participating teachers, who comprised all of the grade 1 through 3 teachers at each school ($n = 18$), completed two surveys. A written survey was completed individually and collected data regarding teachers' academic and professional preparation, years of experience, use of official instructional materials from the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), and their attitudes regarding the usefulness of a variety of instructional strategies. A second survey, administered face-to-face at school during the nutrition break, included questions on use of classroom libraries, use of instructional materials, home-school communication, and possible causes of problems associated with teaching and learning.

The director of José Morelos School and the assistant director of Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez School (the director was on sick leave at the time of the interviews) participated in an open-ended, audiotaped interview of approximately 90 minutes in length with one of the Mexican co-principal investigators. The interview protocol covered topics such as school goals, literacy instruction and assessment, school resources, home-school communication and parent involvement, perceptions of the community and families, and professional development.

Parents were asked to complete a 46-question survey including questions about family demographics and the frequency that family members (mother, father, siblings, target child) engage in a variety of literacy practices. Parents were invited to come to the school, where the surveys were administered in person by project-trained research assistants. In Year 1 of the study, a total of 344 parents of children in grades 1–3 completed the survey (92.5% return rate).

Three families per classroom at each school ($n = 18$) were selected for more in-depth home visits (two visits per family in Year 1) that each included a parent interview, a child interview, and an observational field note. The interviews, carried out by project-trained research assistants, focused on family literacy practices, attitudes, and materials, on parents' participation in church and other community organizations, and detailed data about the children's daily activities outside of school and the opportunities that these offered for literacy use. Research assistants, all Mexican and most natives of the city, transcribed the interviews, which were then verified to ensure that the transcription accurately reflected parents' responses and wording.

For the present analyses, narrative data from the two open-ended parent interviews per family conducted when the children were in first grade were reviewed and coded according to themes of interest. These themes included both those derived from past research and theory, as well as those that emerged through review of the data. Coding themes derived from previous research with Latino immigrant families in the US included home literacy practices, parent-teacher communication, and parent perceptions of teachers/school and community (Reese 2009; Reese and Goldenberg 2006; Reese et al. 1995). Initial codes developed for the current study included literacy instructional methods (whether occurring at home or at school) and parent beliefs regarding teacher perceptions of families/community. Transgenerational literacy/schooling emerged as a theme in the early stages of coding and was added to the list of formal codes. The practice of constant comparison, originally proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1965), was used to examine similarities and differences across participants as well as between community settings. Analytic induction (LeCompte and Schensul 1999) was used to systematically seek negative as well as confirmatory cases. Coded material was reduced using data matrices for purposes of summarizing and

identifying patterns in the data (Miles and Huberman 1994). These themes serve to organize the findings below.

Home literacy environment and continuity of experiences

Children in both communities participate in some common print experiences associated with their lives in an urban environment, and all parents describe their children's interactions with environmental print, as children begin to decode the labels on products and signs on store windows. As one mother described, 'When we'd go somewhere, she'd notice the signs. From the time she was little and first started talking, she'd see a sign and she knew what it said.' (*'Ibamos a algún lado y se fijaba en los letreros. Desde muy chiquita, cuando empezó apenas a hablar y veía un letrero y ella ya sabía que decía'*). Both communities are rich in a variety of signage, ranging from informal and handwritten notices and advertisements to professionally printed signs and banners. These signs advertise products, services, community meetings, classes, and political candidates. Comparable numbers of families in both communities report attending church, where the children are reported to peruse the *hoja parroquial* (church bulletin) or attend catechism class. All families report literacy practices associated with children's schoolwork: help with homework, reviewing children's notebooks, receiving messages from the child's teacher, and purchasing or constructing materials requested by the teacher such as flash cards. In addition, within each community families present a wide range of literacy practices, from families who engage in a variety of activities involving use of text on a daily basis, to families for whom literacy use outside of children's schoolwork and environmental print is rare (Reese et al. under review).

However, although there are commonalities in the experiences of children in the two communities, there are also overall differences in the quantity of literacy observed and engaged in by children in the home in each context. Many of the nine Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez parents describe themselves as addicted to or accustomed to reading (*'adictos a la lectura'* or *'acostumbrados a la lectura'*), and they described multiple ways in which their children experienced reading and writing at home. Several children were reported to write letters to *Niño Dios* (the Christ child) at Christmas time, and others wrote cards to family members. One mother described writing shopping lists with her preschool aged daughters: 'ever since they were little they did them. If for example I said eggs, they drew eggs. If I said carrot, they drew a carrot. Now they can definitely do them [lists] with me.' (*'Desde chiquita hacían, si por ejemplo yo decía huevos, dibujaban huevos. Si decía zanahoria, dibujaban una zanahoria. Ahora ya las hacen definitivamente conmigo.'*) Another mother described how her husband perused the ads that arrived from the local supermarket, and her daughter loved to keep the ads and play with them. Another parent described her son's initiation of literacy use: 'Sometimes he asks permission for something and he makes me little cards. He puts boxes for yes and no. I have to mark them according to whether or not I give him permission.' (*'Hay veces que me pide permiso para algo y me hace tarjetitas. Pone como cuadritos sí y no. Tengo que tachar según el permiso que le doy.'*)

In the Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez community, all of the case study parents reported reading stories to their children in the early years, although in two cases the parents no longer did this with their first grade children because the children were now reading on their own. All of the parents reported that their children had the opportunity to observe them reading and writing. For example in one home the mother explained, 'Since I am a catechist, I have to prepare the theme and they see me preparing the theme, getting information from here and getting information from there. My children, my two boys, are present when I'm teaching the catechism class and they also participate and they do know a little more because they've seen me getting the information.' (*'Como soy catequista, ocupo preparar el tema y ellos me ven preparando el tema, sacando información de aquí, sacando información de allá. Los*

niños cuando estoy dando el catequismo, ellos están presentes, mis dos niños, y pues también como que opinan y sí saben un poquito más porque ellos ven cuando estoy sacando la información.’)

On the other hand, descriptions of the ways that families engaged children in literacy use at home in the working class José Morelos community were quite different. All of the families reported reading to children, and storybook reading was reported in over half of the homes. The others reported reading the children’s school books, homework, prayers, and environmental print (signs and product names). In one home, the older sister read a prayer before meals: ‘It’s her habit to read, when we’re getting ready to eat or something, to read from a booklet that I have with readings for the month, five minute prayers. But he (first grader) doesn’t like it.’ (*‘Tiene la costumbre de que vamos a comer o algo y les lee un pedacito de, tengo libritos para leer lo del mes, cinco minutos de oración.’*) The mother then added that the first grader *‘casi no le gusta.’*) At the same time, however, most of the mothers (eight out of nine) reported that their children did not observe them reading and/or writing at home. This is not to say that reading and writing were not occurring in the homes – parents did report reading the newspaper or the Bible and older siblings often reported internet use – however, descriptions of parents engaging with their children in tasks like making lists or writing stories and cards did not emerge in the interviews with José Morelos parents. For example, a father who brought home calculations for a carpentry job he was working on was reported to tell his daughter, ‘No, leave that alone because you’re going to lose the paper that I wrote on.’ (*‘No, ahí deja porque me vas a perder esa hoja lo que apunté.’*) Rather, parents’ descriptions of children’s reading and writing and their own involvement with their children around reading and writing were largely centered around completing the school homework. These findings mirror those of Paratore, Melzi, and Krol-Sinclair (2003) working with Latino immigrant families in the US who also found that the most common literacy activities were those ‘deliberately and explicitly intended to advance their children’s learning’ (106). In other words, a common practice in the homes were instructional literacy practices, understood as formal school practices to be replicated in the home and not as activities associated with informal learning in everyday settings.

In the parent interviews we found evidence of a continuity of experiences between what parents experienced as children in and out of school, and the kinds of experiences that they provided for their children. In the Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez community, as compared with the José Morelos community, more parents were read to as children (44% vs 11%), more were told stories as children (89% vs 55%), and more parents read stories to their children during or prior to first grade (100% vs 67%). One of the Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez mothers said of her own family growing up that ‘reading was our daily bread’ (*‘lectura era el pan de cada día’*), and another stated proudly that she was in the *cuadro de honor* (honor guard) in elementary school: ‘When I was little I can also tell you that I was a good student, because I have good retention. I never really had any difficulty and I believe that my children are the same way.’ (*‘Cuando yo estaba chica también puedo decirte que fui una estudiante buena, porque tengo buena retención...Realmente nunca se me dificultó nada y como yo pienso que así son porque así les ha ido a ellos.’*)

The confidence with which many of the Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez parents talked about their own school experiences was not mirrored in the José Morelos community. Half of the parents had themselves grown up in the José Morelos community and attended the same school that their children attended. One mother said that she did not like school and cried when she was taken. One of the fathers described his wife as an *‘analfabestia’* (a pejorative term that takes the word *analfabeta*, or illiterate, and turns it into ‘illiterabeast’) because her family took her out of school in grade 2. She herself said of the local school ‘the little that I learned was learned there’ (*‘lo poco que aprendí fue allí’*). Another father reported his

attempts to motivate his daughter to try her best in school by drawing on his own experience: 'We're all like this. We were all children once and it was hard work for us to learn, and they also criticized us because we didn't know anything, and so you need to stop being afraid of writing.' (*Así somos todos. Todos fuimos niños y[a] todos nos costó trabajo aprender y también nos llamaba la atención porque no sabíamos hacer nada, y pues hay que perder el miedo para escribir.*) Like the youth and adult literacy program students in Brazil described by Bartlett (2007), parents reported shaming episodes in school in which they were made to feel inferior due to their speech patterns and literacy proficiency.

Parent reports revealed not only a continuity of schooling and learning experiences between parent and child generations, but also transgenerational communication of attitudes and assumptions regarding literacy and schooling, attitudes that were associated with parents' own school experiences. Our results mirror those of Del Valle (2005) in his work with Puerto Rican immigrant families in the US, in which differences in home literacy environments were associated with differences in the mothers' experiences as either the teacher's pet in a Catholic school in Puerto Rico or as a self-described 'troublemaker' and school drop-out. Our findings also complement those of Scheuer et al. (2001) in Argentina, who collected elementary school students' perspectives on their own writing development. Comparing experiences of middle class children with those from the 'marginalized sector' (parents with less than elementary schooling), they found that all students stated that writing began at home for them and involved family members. However, while families in the marginalized sector wrote letters to communicate with family members or wrote notes to school, their use of literacy was primarily realized and/or directed outside of the home, the families in the middle class sector experienced literacy as an inherent activity of family life.

Up to this point, our findings are consistent with a traditional 'cultural capital' explanation; that is, middle class parents are creating home environments that are saturated with literacy, storybook reading, and conversations surrounding stories and uses of print. This greater familiarity with text transmitted in the home would be expected to serve as an advantage for these children when they enter school. However, as we explore below, home is not alone as a source of cultural capital, nor is it the sole contributor to inequalities in educational outcomes.

Contrasting community settings

Families reside in communities that differ with respect to socioeconomic status, contributing to different perceptions by the teachers of the families. The *colonia* in which Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez School is located is described by parents, teachers, and the school director as *tranquila* (quiet or tranquil). Parents describe it as a place where one can leave one's door open and where the neighbors are friendly. Although the director stated that many of the students come from homes in which parents are separated or divorced, or where the children live with their grandparents because their parents work, she said that in this lower middle class community 'the majority are attentive to school needs' (*en su mayoría atienden las necesidades de la escuela*). Teachers also found the community to be tranquil, friendly, and 'a good cultural and economic level' (*de un buen nivel cultural y económico*). Another teacher's description of the students' families underscores the perceived connection between the families' socioeconomic and cultural levels: 'The parents help since their economic level is upper middle, and this means that the parents are better educated and more involved with their families.' (*Los padres de familia apoyan ya que su nivel económico es medio-alto y eso hace que los padres sean más preparados y comprometidos con su familia.*)

A different community image emerges as parents and teachers describe the *pueblito*, or the community surrounding José Morelos School. Originally an indigenous community dating

to the pre-conquest period, the *pueblito* retains its saint's day celebrations, dances and customs infused with pre-Columbian traditions. It is a community that until recently was characterized by adobe houses and unpaved streets. Some residents express pride in their pueblo: 'I'm a native from here, so I say it's the best' (*'Yo soy nativa de aquí, pos yo digo que es la mejor'*), one mother stated. However, parents also describe their community as plagued with conflicts, fights and drugs. Several parents described how the weekends and the community celebrations are the time when many of these fights break out, with one mother lamenting that the police from the nearby municipality will not step in when this happens and that taxis from the city refuse to enter their community at night. An isolated community for centuries, the pueblo now receives migrants from other states in Mexico, many of whom speak indigenous languages. Some of the residents claim that these newer residents are the ones selling drugs and causing problems. One mother stated, 'As soon as they say where are you from? "From San José." Oh, they say, that's where they steal and kill people and that's not true. A lot of those killed are from Oaxaca, from Veracruz, from other places and they're not from here.' (*'No más dicen ¿de dónde eres? "De San José." Uy, dicen, ahí roban y matan y no es cierto. Muchos que se han matado aquí son de Oaxaca, de Veracruz, de distintos lados y de aquí no son.'*) The media are also described as contributing to this negative image of the community. 'Sometimes in the newspaper it says that so-and-so was beaten up, or so-and-so was injured' (*'A veces sacan en el periódico, que golpearon a fulanito, hirieron a sutanito'*).

For the most part, the teachers' descriptions of the José Morelos community reflect the negative aspects mentioned by parents without a corresponding pride in the community's cultural past or in its recent improvements. One teacher described the community as 'like a red light of violence and drug addiction added to maltreatment in the family' (*'como un foco rojo de violencia y drogadicción aunado al maltrato familiar'*). Other teachers mention the poverty, marginalization, delinquency, gangs, and violence in the community. These characteristics are associated with values such as lack of respect, scarce family values, and lack of interest in school. One teacher summed up the community as 'multicultural, violent and barely tolerable; there are bad-mouthed and disrespectful children' (*'pluricultural, violenta y poco tolerable, existen niños groseros e irrespetuosos'*).

Teacher perceptions of literacy instruction, students, and families

The teacher survey results revealed few differences between teachers in the two communities with respect to their use and evaluation of the literacy instructional materials provided by the government (teacher's guide and supplemental materials)¹. Teachers in both settings reported finding the teacher's guides helpful, appropriate for the level of their students, and useful in meeting the program objectives. Teachers in both schools rated fluency, intonation, diction, comprehension, spelling and handwriting as important or very important aspects of literacy development, with teachers at both schools rating reading comprehension most highly. In addition, teachers at both schools rated the importance of sharing academic goals with the parents as very important, and both groups stated that they did communicate these to parents.

With respect to use of books other than textbooks in the classrooms, practices at the two sites differed. Teachers in both schools reported having classroom libraries, and close to 90% of the teachers in each group reported presenting the books to the children in class. However, the classrooms in Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez School contained on average double the number of books as the classrooms in José Morelos School ($x = 120$ vs 60 books per classroom), and Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez teachers reported that children in their classes used the books somewhat more frequently than did students in José Morelos School (twice a week as compared to once a week). It was in José Morelos that unopened packages of new

books were observed, or books were reported to be stored in the locked teacher cabinets. In most of the classrooms, therefore, bookshelves were empty and or used for storage of other things.

Although teachers at the two schools had similar levels of preparation and reported similar attitudes and experiences with respect to the national curriculum, teachers' attitudes regarding the communities in which they work and the families of their students varied greatly. As we saw above, teachers perceived the community surrounding Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez School as a tranquil, middle class community that provides residents with the services and resources necessary to support schooling. Teachers did not describe their students as uniformly high achieving, rather they noted a range of performance in their classrooms. Some children were described by their teachers as 'restless' (*inquietos*), and one teacher added that, as first graders, 'they aren't very disciplined yet' (*todavía tienen poca disciplina*). But overall, the teachers' descriptions of students and parents were positive. When parents were not involved in school, 80% of the teachers said that this was because of demands of work.

Teachers' descriptions of the José Morelos School community stand in stark comparison to the positive perceptions described above for the middle class community. Teachers' negative perceptions and descriptions of the community characterize their views of parents and children as well. One of the nine teachers surveyed described her students as hard-working and responsible. The remaining 89% of the teachers described their students in negative terms: 'disorganized, lazy, apathetic' (*desordenados, flojos, apáticos*). As one teacher said of her class, 'The group presents grave problems with conduct and bad habits brought from home' (*El grupo presenta un gran problema de conducta y malas costumbres desde su hogar*). In this community, lack of parent support for schooling is attributed by 55% of the teachers to parents' lack of interest and apathy. One teacher connected this as well to parents' 'lack of culture' (*falta de cultura*). In this working class community, teachers' comments revealed a tendency on the teachers' part to devalue work as a legitimate contributor to lack of parent support of schooling. As one teacher put it, 'The pretext is that they don't have time because they work' (*El pretexto es que no tienen tiempo porque trabajan*), and another teacher echoed the sentiment, 'Others work and claim that they don't have time' (*Otros trabajan y argumentan no tener tiempo*). Evaluations of the local community in cultural and moral terms shape not only how teachers view students and families but also how they interact with them.

To this point, the study has demonstrated that the kinds of class-related teacher perceptions and expectations of students documented in the US over the past three decades (e.g. Carnoy and Levin 1985; Levin 1987; Rist 1970) are also patterns in Mexico, and that class-based expectations on the part of teachers continue to be prevalent in Mexico. In the sections that follow, we document ways in which these expectations shape communications and interactions with parents, with 'home' practices emerging as co-constructions based on both parent and teacher input.

Parent perceptions of the school and teachers

Our study has enabled us to gather both parent and teacher perspectives, and it is interesting to note that parents' perceptions and evaluations of their children's schools and teachers mirror, to a large extent, those of the teachers. Parents of students at Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez School described the school in largely positive terms; one mother stated that 'it is like a private school' (*es como un colegio*). Parents proudly described the resources that the school has, such as its three ample play areas, English classes, and computers. Extras, such as the English instruction, are made possible by the yearly fee that parents pay (even

though this is a public school). Parents' descriptions of the children's curriculum included mention of lessons on environmental issues and community studies, as well as artistic and cultural activities. 'A school like this is needed everywhere', one mother contended ('*Hace falta una escuela como esta en todas partes*').

Just as Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez teachers described the parents as *profesionistas* (professional class) who exhibit family values and support for education, the parents described the teachers' *atenciones*, or care, with the children. Parents saw the teachers as trained and well prepared, who not only 'complete the [learning] objectives' ('*cumplen los objetivos*') but also 'are not absent' ('*no faltan*'). Parents at this school did not report being involved in academic decisions at the site; however, they described the ways in which teachers involved them on an individual level as collaborative partnerships. For example, Veronica's mother rated the teacher's efforts to involve the parents in children's learning as 'good', stating that 'she just comments to us that "Veronica is doing poorly in Spanish. You have to help her a little, like in putting words together." Right away I look for what I can do to help her form words and to find ways for her to understand things.' ('*Nada más nos comenta "Verónica anda mal en español. Tienes que apoyarla poquito más, en un decir, que junte palabras." Yo en ese momento busco que puedo hacer para que Verónica junte las palabras, que vea de que manera pueda entender ella esas cosas.*') One parent mentioned that the teacher sent home '*temarios*' or sheets with the topics listed that the children were studying in school, and another contended that the teacher was always available: 'When I need to talk with the teacher I can find her' ('*Cuando necesito hablar con la maestra la encuentro*'). One of the few criticisms that emerged in one-third of the interviews was from the parents of children who were higher achievers, those children who had entered first grade already knowing how to read. One quoted the teacher as saying that the more advanced children got bored because of the large class size and the differences in performance among the children in class.

The contrast with the perspectives of the José Morelos parents is vivid. Although one-third of the parents described the José Morelos teachers as doing a good job of teaching ('*enseñan bien*'), another third described teachers as lacking in interest as well as in professional preparation. Over half of the parents were dissatisfied with the teachers' interactions with their children, stating that teachers were abusive and unjust in their discipline and that they 'complain a lot' ('*regañan mucho*'). Close to half described the classrooms as overcrowded, and one mother characterized the classroom as 'a shouting match' ('*un gritadero*'). Parents also complained that teachers were often absent. Project observers documented multiple instances of teachers being called away from their rooms and of classes left unsupervised, or classes of absent teachers being watched by the next door teacher.

Another common complaint was that José Morelos School was closed to parents, as one mother stated 'It seems like a prison' ('*parece prisión*') (For example, a mother described how the teacher wanted her to help with preparations for a class project, but the mother was not allowed through the school gate and could not provide the help the teacher asked for. The closed door policy was confirmed by the director, who explained her rationale:

Entonces la enfermedad del alcoholismo y todos esos males o sea de la drogadicción y todo, entonces por eso es que yo tengo la puerta cerrada. No porque no quiero comunicarme con los padres de familia. Yo quiero que la escuela sea una escuela abierta pero es cerrada a la vez. Si dejo entrar a una señora, pues tengo que dejar entrar a todas, y como son muchas, pues no vamos a poder dedicarnos a lo que es el trabajo con los niños, a que los niños construyan sus aprendizajes.' Nada mas tienen permiso de entrar de las 12, todos los viernes de las 12 a las 12.30, media hora y así ya se que hablan lo concreto, a lo que vienen, no estar plática y

So with the sickness of alcoholism and all those problems, like drug addiction and everything, so that is why I have the gate closed. Not because I don't want to communicate with the parents. I do want the school to be open, but it is still closed. If I let in one woman, then I have to let in everyone, and since there are a lot, then we wouldn't be able to dedicate ourselves to our work with children, so that children construct their own learning.' They only have permission to enter every Friday from 12 to 12:30, just a half hour so that they talk concretely and not just come her to chat and chat, and that the school becomes an unsafe place.

plática, entonces la escuela se convertiría en un lugar inseguro.

Our data suggest that teacher (and administrator) perceptions of parents also shape the manner in which they interact with parents. In both her formal interview and in more informal encounters, the director of José Morelos school proudly described interactions with parents in which she appeared to be frank and jokingly aggressive in her dealings with parents, demonstrating the qualities of ‘frank treatment’ (*franqueza*) that Farr (2005) contended were typical of the *ranchero* identity. She talked about how she would chide the parents for not coming to meetings or not supporting the teachers and laughingly added: ‘I complain to the parents and I don’t care. Sometimes I tell them how can you expect your children to be calm if you yourselves are badly behaved? If there isn’t unity, then the children don’t do well. How can you expect your children to be little apples if you yourselves are lemons?’ (‘*Yo regaño a los papás y no me interesa. A veces les digo ¿cómo quieren que sus hijos estén tranquilos si ustedes no se portan bien? Si no hay integración, pues sus hijos andan mal. ¿Cómo quieren que sus hijos sean manzanitas si ustedes son limones?*’) She felt that the parents responded to her *franqueza* in a similar joking fashion. For example, when parents complained that the school was too crowded, the director reported answering back, ‘I do say this to the ladies, ‘Don’t have so many children. What are you, rabbits?’ I say that to them and they get mad. ‘No, teacher, we’re not rabbits; we’re tlacuaches [a trickster animal character from precolombian folklore]’ (‘*Yo sí les digo a las señoras: ya no tengan tantos hijos. ¿Qué son, conejos? Hasta eso les digo y se enojan: No maestra, no somos conejos, somos tlacuaches.*’)

There were descriptions in some of the parent interviews of teacher’s interactions with children and parents that were characterized by a brutal directness. For example, one mother described how her daughter was pulled out of the classroom by her hair by the teacher (‘*la maestra la jaló de sus greñas y la sacó pa’ fuera*’). In the parent conference following the event, the teacher asked the mother if there was drinking and violence in the home, because she had observed tendencies toward violent behavior in the child. This type of frank and accusatory interaction was simply not reported in the interviews of parents in the more upscale Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez community.

In the section above, we have seen that, in part, parent perceptions of teachers reflect the teachers’ perceptions of parents. That is, parents who are seen by teachers as attentive and supportive in turn perceive the teachers as attentive and effective. Parents who are perceived as lacking in interest and positive values by their children’s teachers in turn perceive the teachers as lacking in interest and preparation and abusive in their treatment of children. The teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of the parents contribute to policies such as the closed campus policy, as well as shaping interaction patterns such as the bullying and joking engaged in by the José Morelos director and some of the teachers.

At the same time, some of the conditions that contribute to a richer teaching and learning environment at Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez are possible due to the material extras that parents in that middle class environment are able to provide. Parent pay *cuotas*, or supplemental fees, for additional teachers for English and art, for cleaning the school, and for computer instruction at all grade levels. In addition, parents are reported to fill in occasionally when a teacher is absent. Apparently this strategy is possible in a community where the majority of parents are professionals, but would not be possible in José Morelos, where the average number of years of schooling is 6.7. In that community, children are left without English classes, with a computer lab that is not operational, and with high rates of teacher absenteeism. These findings are consistent with Willms and Somers’ (2001) analysis of factors associated with educational outcomes for the Latin American region as a whole, namely that all of the school resources variables (such as infrastructure, instructional

materials, and size of library) with the exception of pupil teacher ratio were positively correlated with the socioeconomic level of the school.

Instruction and co-construction

Finally, in seeking to understand how home literacy practices might be influenced by the expectations of and interactions with teachers, as well as by the parents' own experiences and attitudes, we move to the area of school instruction, for it is in this area that we also observe differences between the two settings. Differences between the community settings of Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez and José Morelos go beyond the perceptions, attitudes, and stereotypes held by parents and teachers, and also beyond differences in what parents and children are doing at home, the original notion of cultural capital. These differences extend to the way in which literacy is being instructed at school, at least in part, and thus to the associated parent understandings of what their role in assisting their children's literacy development is.

Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez and José Morelos schools are similar in some key aspects. Both have large class sizes of 50 students per classroom. Both follow the national curriculum, and survey findings reveal that teachers in both groups describe themselves on average as 'in agreement with the majority of the aspects of the program'. Teachers at both schools rate themselves as 'adequately prepared' to teach reading.

The main goal of the Mexican national program for teaching reading and writing in elementary school is to teach the different functions and forms of the language for communicative purposes. It focuses on 'promoting the development of children's communicative abilities, that is, that children learn to use oral and written language for an efficient communication both in the school as well as in different social contexts' (SEP 2000, 13). The program consists of four components: oral expression, reading, writing, and reflections about the language. Although as a didactic strategy these components are taught separately in a lesson, they are considered parts of a whole system for teaching. It is expected that by means of working on the four components in the lesson children will understand the alphabetic principle and develop reading and writing skills according to their school grade. Thus, letter names, letter sounds, and syllables are not taught in isolation but rather as part of a holistic, communicative approach literacy instruction.

This program is compulsory for all Mexican schools, public and private, and it is supported with specific books and activity books prepared by the SEP (Secretaría de Educación Pública). All first grade children are provided with a book for reading, an activity book and a figures book (figures that children cut to stick on the activity book). Although teachers are expected to follow the guidelines and sequence of lessons and activities indicated in the teacher's manuals, they are also allowed to make changes and enrich lessons according to children's needs and interests.

However, although receiving similar preparation to teach the national curriculum and reporting similar ideologies with respect to its implementation, teachers at the two schools reported engaging in somewhat different teaching practices using the national materials. Teachers at Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez School had on average 17.4 years of experience teaching (range = 6–31 years), compared with 10.6 years of experience (range = 2–25 years) for teachers at José Morelos School. These more experienced Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez teachers reported that they used the national curriculum almost exclusively, with only two reporting that they augmented this program with other methods. On the other hand, in José Morelos School, a majority of the teachers reported using other methods along with the national curriculum. Two reported using the syllabic method; as one teacher explained, 'Because there are 53 children and with this method they learn to read faster and I can tell

easily the ones who are falling behind' (*'Porque son 53 niños y con este método aprenden a leer más rápido y me doy cuenta de los que van atrasados fácilmente.'*). Others reported using the global method, an eclectic method, and a sight word method (*método dibujo-palabra*).

Parents' descriptions of the way in which their children were being taught to read also differed from school to school. The majority of Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez parents described how the children were taught to blend letter sounds: 'This is the method they use here, the sound of the letter' (*'Es el método que utilizan aquí, el sonido de la letra'*). Another mother explained, 'They don't work on separate syllables anymore, like ca-rro. Now they started to work on whole words so they don't read letter by letter anymore' (*'No les maneja por sílaba separada de ca-rro. Ya las empezaron a manejar completas para que no deletrearan tanto'*). By contrast, in the José Morelos community, two-thirds of the parents described the way that their children are being taught as following a syllabic method. One of the mothers described the teacher as beginning with the vowels and the alphabet: 'And then they joined the letters "like M with A, ma, M with E, me" and that's how they learned them' (*'y ya las juntaba las letras, "que eme con a, ma, eme con e, me" y así ya se los aprendían'*). Another mother described how the teacher, Maestra Virginia, had given the children a laminated alphabet card, and with it they did 'join S, A, and it says sa; join the L and the A, sala' (*'junta ese. a, dice sa, júntale la ele y la a, sala'*).

The method described by these parents in the José Morelos community follows the traditional reading method in Mexico brought from Spain in the colonial period, the method of the *cartilla y deletreo* or 'primer and spelling' (Tanck de Estrada 1998). In this method, dating from the sixteenth century, the pupil was given a pamphlet (the *cartilla*) with the vowels, the alphabet, and then over 300 isolated syllables, followed by sentences embodying Catholic doctrine. Tanck de Estrada (1998, 54) explained how children were taught to read: *'El alumno al ver "tra ba jo" diría', 'Te, ere, a, tra; be, a, ba; jota, o jo: tra-ba-jo.'* In other words, pupil would name the letters for the syllables in isolation, followed by a final reading of the word, separating the word syllable-by-syllable. An advance in method by the nineteenth century was to substitute the letter-by-letter reading (*el deletreo*) for the direct reading of the syllables with blended letter sounds (*el silabeo*). According to parent descriptions, vestiges of both the *deletreo* and the *silabeo* are still practiced in José Morelos, and at least some of the teachers state that they rely on syllabic instruction to support the initial reading development of non-reading first graders.

According to the director of José Morelos School, this situation is explained by the fact that the teachers are following the national curriculum and the parents simply do not understand this:

Por ejemplo, hace días tuve como un problema con unas señoras que vinieron enojadas: --'Maestra, es que esa maestra no está trabajando; los niños no saben la e, no saben las letras.' --¿Cómo que no saben? Sí saben esos niños. La maestra está trabajando con el método global de análisis estructural y el proceso de construcción de la lecto-escritura es más, o sea, tarda más. Pero ustedes se van a dar cuenta como es mejor que el de las sílabas o el onomatopéyico; eso es del tiempo de la canica.' Ay Dios mío, por eso a veces es trabajoso hacer que la gente entienda.

For example, several days ago I had a problem with some ladies who came and were angry. 'Teacher, that teacher isn't working. The children don't know the letter E; they don't know the letters.' 'What do you mean, they don't know. The children do know. The teacher is using the global method of structural analysis and the process of construction of literacy is one that takes longer. But you'll realize that this method is better than the syllabic or the onomatopoeic. Those are from olden times.' Oh, Lord, this is why it is so hard sometimes to get people to understand.

However, our data indicate that the perceptions of the parents of how reading is taught to their children are not simply the result of lack of understanding of the method the teacher is using, or of parents' own preference for antiquated methods, as the director claimed. Rather, parents' understandings are co-constructed with the teachers. The teachers at José Morelos School themselves make more use of the traditional methods, and they send home materials

such as the laminated alphabet cards that reinforce these older methods. Through the materials being sent home and the recommendations made by teachers for how they should help at home, parents' understandings of literacy development are reinforced, understandings characterized by the director as old-fashioned and not in line with modern standards.

Bourdieu makes the distinction between cultural capital in the embodied state, or long-term dispositions, attitudes, linguistic usages, and understandings, and cultural capital in the objectified state, or in the form of cultural goods such as books, pictures, instruments, etc. (Bourdieu 1984). Our analyses have yielded differences in the cultural capital of children and families in the two communities in both the embodied and the objectified states. At the same time, differences in both states are observed not only in the homes of the children but also in the points of connection between home and school.

Discussion

The notion of cultural capital as originally proposed by Bourdieu has proven to be extremely fruitful in uncovering social inequalities and, by implication, how these may be transformed (Mills and Gale 2007). However, his work has also been the subject of critique. In response to perceptions that the concept reflects a deficit view of nondominant class families, some researchers have proposed alternative definitions of cultural capital. Reflecting a view in line with a 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005) orientation, Garcia (2000) states:

A person's entire set of cultural relationships, not just in the family but across all the social spheres, has been called his or her cultural capital. In effect, it is the cultural fund that the individual draws upon to support all the activities of life. Not only does it help protect and nurture the individual in family or family-like settings; it also plays a similar role in nonfamily-like institutions, especially the school. (84)

Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (2003) put a different spin on cultural capital, stating that 'much of the cultural capital of human societies emerges from philosophical, literary, musical, and artistic attempts to answer fundamentally religious questions' (251). However, in extending the definition of cultural capital to include all people and groups regardless of class status, the value of the concept in providing at least a partial explanation for persistent class-associated variation in students' academic performance is lost.

The 2007 INEE study cited at the beginning of the article also makes somewhat misleading use of cultural capital concept. In that study, 'academic cultural capital' was operationalized as the parents' level of education, their expectations regarding their children's educational attainment, frequency of movie attendance, number of books in the home, and home access to the internet. These were variables that loaded onto a single factor that was associated with student achievement; however, other variables, such as frequency of going to a museum or to a theatre production, equally predicted to form part of the cultural capital concept from a theoretical standpoint, were not included because they were not found to predict student outcomes. Ultimately, the report found variation in both achievement outcomes as well as in academic cultural capital at the school level to be greater than variation at the individual level, a condition that they found to represent '*una alta segregación educativa en los centros escolares con base en el nivel sociocultural de sus estudiantes*' (a high [level of] school segregation based on the sociocultural level of the students) (32). The authors note that this relationship can also be related to families with higher levels of academic cultural capital choosing schools with more and better resources than those available to families with lower levels of academic cultural capital (Backhoff et al. 2007).

What the findings of our study point to are also clear differences in both families' cultural capital, as evidenced in the varied literacy practices involving first-grade children, as well as in school-level student performance. However, differences in cultural capital appear to provide only a partial explanation for the performance outcomes. Differences in the literacy experiences of children are not exclusive to the home environment; differences are apparent in the communities in which they live and in the resources and opportunities available at the schools where they study. Differences in the ways in which teachers communicate with parents and involve them in their children's schooling were documented, as well as differences in the ways in which early literacy instruction was implemented by teachers who were presumably using the same national curriculum. Finally, school treatment and expectations experienced by parents formed part of the legacy of experience and understandings that shaped their interactions and practices with their own children.

A year and a half after the data collection for this first-year study, the parents at José Morelos School went on strike, picketing outside the school and closing the school for a day. Parents complained of the same conditions that have been described above: high rates of teacher absenteeism and lack of respect for parents. The placards held by parents as they blocked the school gate read 'If all children have the right to an education, why do ours not have a teacher. We demand that each class has its own teacher! We demand a school that's dignified and clean, and that they respect us as parents.' (*'Si todos los niños tienen derecho a una educación, por que los de nosotros no tienen maestro.'* '¡Exigimos que cada grupo tenga a su propio maestro!' 'Exigimos una escuela digna y limpia y que nos respeten a nosotros como padres.') Their slogans indicate a lack of conformity with the structural inequalities in the educational system that result in a crowded and inadequately staffed school campus; and they also reveal resistance to the treatment that they and their children receive at the hands of school personnel. The parent strike resulted in the removal of the director from José Morelos School during the third year of our study; however, at the time of writing it is still too soon to determine if the strike had an effect on the conditions that the parents were struggling to improve.

The willingness of parents in both communities to help children with homework and follow through on requests from teachers, as well as the organization of the strike in the working class community, indicate a level of parent engagement in their children's schooling that is at odds with stereotypes and assumptions of many Mexican educators as well as US educators who work with Mexican families. In the US, teachers' beliefs about the potential involvement of working class and Latino parents in their children's education are often reinforced in the textbooks that they read in their professional preparation classes, for example that middle and upper class parents are more involved in their children's schooling (Marshall 2002) or that cultural attitudes such as depreciating education after high school and emphasis of family over the achievement and life goals of children may hinder classroom success for Mexican-American students (Díaz-Rico 2008). Instead, the findings reported here help to illuminate the role of schools and teachers in contributing to the understandings and experiences that the children are perceived to be 'bringing from home'. With this understanding can come efforts to modify connections between school and home for the benefit of children's academic performance and experience.

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