

Cultural Practices of Literacy: A Case of Costa Rica
Final Report for the Spencer Foundation¹

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Focus of Study

In cooperation with officials from the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education, I conducted a six-month ethnography in Costa Rica, from January 1, 2006 – June 30, 2006. One focus of the research was to explore factors that may account for many of the difficulties that are experienced by poor and marginalized children in the Costa Rican Schools, particularly those of Nicaraguan immigrants. This focus reflects the primary interest of education officials in Costa Rica. The second focus of the study was to come to deeper understandings of the relationships of young children's community-based literacy practices and their ways of learning from early literacy instruction in school, one of the central goals of my larger project, Cultural Practices of Literacy Study (CPLS) (Purcell-Gates, in press). This latter I view as key to much-needed theorizing of social and cultural marginality as it relates to academic achievement. I focused exclusively on the early literacy learning of the children primarily because high rates of first-grade retention is considered to be a problem in the Costa Rican schools and because the success in first stages of learning to read and write determines the level of success at learning in other subjects and in the later grades.

Theoretical Frame & Related Research

This study of literacy in community reflects a theoretical frame of literacy as social and cultural practice (Street, 1984) that is patterned by social institutions, historical settings, values, beliefs, and power relationships (Au, 2002; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Brandt, 2001; Fishman, 1988; Moje, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 1995, 1996; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street 1995).

Young children grow up in communities and homes. Within these contexts they learn values and beliefs about literacy and literacy practices as they experience and participate in them. They acquire cognitive models for how and why literacy is practiced, who does and does not do it, and emergent literacy concepts. Emergent literacy knowledge strongly predicts success at learning to read and write in school (Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Purcell-Gates & Dahl, 1991; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Disjuncture between socially constructed literacy practice and school-centered literacy practice can prevent children from learning, and when children are allowed to build on what they know about language, using familiar texts and symbol systems, they appear to move into traditional academic literacy more easily (Dyson, 2003; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Lee, 1993; Mahiri, 1998; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Rogers, 2003).

Focusing Questions

Within these foci and frames, I sought to describe through ethnographic means:
(a) the social, cultural, political, economic, and historical reality of immigrants from

Nicaragua in Costa Rica; (b) the social, cultural, political, economic, and historical context of Costa Rica as the host country; (c) the literacy practices of the mainstream Costa Rican context; (d) the literacy practices within the Nicaraguan community; (e) the literacy practices of the Costa Rican schools attended by the Nicaraguan children; and (f) transactions between the children's experiences with reading and writing in their lives outside of school – in their homes and communities – and those within their classrooms

One of the major intents of this study is to work with the Costa Rica Ministry of Public Education to explore new ways of designing and delivering instruction in literacy during the early grades. Therefore, the classrooms observations and interviews with parents and teachers were also analyzed to arrive at implications for such instruction.

Method

To address the foregoing foci, I observed for 150 hours in one class each of kindergarten, first grade, and second grade of a school in an area close to the capitol city, San José. During these observations, I noted the ways that the teachers taught literacy and other content areas, the texts they used, the texts and purposes for reading and writing them that the children engaged with, and the general tenor and operations of the school. I also collected reading and writing artifacts, and during the final month I assessed the early literacy knowledge of the children in kindergarten and grade one with (a) the *Instrumento de Observacion De Los Logros De La Lecto-Escitura Inicial*, the Spanish reconstruction of Clay's *Concepts of Print Test: Conceptos del Texto Impreso* (Concepts About Print) and *Escritura de Vocabulario* (Writing Vocabulary) (Escamilla, Andrade, Basurto, & Ruiz (1996), *Spanish Version*. I also visited three other public schools near precarios in the country to judge the typicality of the school in which I was a participant observer. For comparison, I also visited a private school near the capitol city, observed in the kindergarten classes, and the first- and second-grade classes. I also interviewed the Director and the kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers.

The area of the school where I observed is middle-class and completely Costa Rican (i.e. is not the part of the city where foreigners visit and own homes) with pockets of real poverty and 'shantytowns,' termed *precarios*, where primarily Nicaraguan immigrants live. The families with children in the school were low- to low-middle-income. The wealthier families in the area sent their children to private schools. I lived in this area in a small home. During my six months living in the country, I also observed and noted the literacy practices in the Costa Rican social, cultural, and political context.

Beginning in March (schools begin in February), after gaining access, I noted public literacy practices in a nearby precario, where I also conducted in-home structured interviews of literacy practice (see Appendix 1 for the interview protocol). I also conducted interviews of literacy practices in the homes of the Nicaraguan and poor Costa Rican children in the classes where I observed. For this study, the term "literacy practice" refers to both the texts that people read and write and the purposes for which (and contexts within) they read and write them. Finally, I visited three other large precarios in the country to assess the typicality of the one in which I was working.

To provide essential context for the research, I also interviewed Ministry of Education officials, teachers, community leaders, and officials of organizations devoted to working with children and immigrant children, in particular, in areas of schooling and human rights. I collected curriculum documents and consulted with University of Costa

Rica and National University psychology and education faculty regarding the literacy curriculum in the country and the socio-political situation of Nicaraguan immigrants. I recorded a total of 34 interviews, with a total of 264 pages of English transcripts and 400 pages of Spanish transcripts. Field notes for textual practices in the Costa Rican contexts numbered 250 pages; collected artifacts documenting textual genres within the mainstream contexts and social and political contexts of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Nicaraguan immigrants in Costa Rica numbered 600 pages (from newspapers, magazine articles, flyers, etc.).

The contextual data was analysed using constant-comparative coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) for emerging and enlightening themes. The data on literacy practices was analysed by coding for the following: (a) Socio-textual activity domain mediated by the textual practice; (b) Purpose/Function for reading and writing for observed or reported textual practice; (c) Text/Genre read or written; (d) Whether reading or writing event.

Results

Socio-Political Contexts

Costa Rica in the 21st century is Central America's most developed country. It began as one of Spain's poorest colonies, and its history of small farming and independent small business owners reveals itself in its long-treasured cultural narrative of the value of individual effort and focus on human rights. It has no standing army (as of 1948), and instead has invested its money in universal health care and education. It has the highest literacy rate (97%) in Central America.

The country has a long history of democratic process, and recently the voters are becoming more and more restive at the economic consequences of globalization and the impoverishment of their neighbors by the World Bank procedures of re-structuralization. Nicaragua, in particular, has suffered economically as the result of the revolution during the 1970s and the Contra offensive waged by the U.S. which destroyed many of the educational and health initiatives begun by the winning revolutionary party. In the five years preceding this investigation, Nicaraguans had been pouring across the border into Costa Rica as economic immigrants, seeking work and basic necessities for their families. This influx has put a tremendous strain on the economy of Costa Rica. This has been especially felt in the areas of health and education. As a result, at the time of the beginning of this study, resentment and prejudice has grown within the Costa Rican population against the Nicaraguan immigrants, the majority of whom are illegal in status. Many of the intelligentsia, including education officials, were concerned that, not only did this situation fly in the face of Costa Rica's value system of equality and human rights, but that the schools, in particular, were failing the Nicaraguan children, partly through prejudice and resentment on the part of teachers, reflecting widespread public sentiment.

Literacy in the Dominant Society

Literacy is widely practiced in Costa Rica and texts of all types mediate the lives of the Costa Rican's. Within the capitol area (where 80% of the population lives and works), more than six different daily newspapers are sold and read by all strata of the population. Book stores abound, from large chains to small in-home *librerías*. Commerce and tourism bring multiple texts for reading and writing, and the ubiquitous bureaucracy is awash in printed forms and regulations. A recent government/education initiative has filled the stores with cheaply reproduced books for children and adults in an attempt to

increase the frequency of 'reading' in the country. Suffice it to say that Costa Rica has a high degree of literacy use with many different texts being available and used by people of all ways of life and of all ages. The country is saturated with textual practice similar to that of other developed countries such as the United States, Britain, and Canada. However, literacy practices shift and take different forms according to social, cultural, and political contexts and we can assume that the literacy practices in poor and marginalized communities will differ in some ways.

Literacy Practices in Poor and Marginalized Communities

In the precario, the community texts were composed primarily of signage for small businesses such as pulperias or services. Signs such as "Hay Pollo (There's Chicken (for sale)," "Se Compre Alumino (Aluminum for Sale)," or "Se Repare Ropa (Clothing Repaired)" constitute the majority of the community texts that surround the children in their daily lives. The second most common were graffiti on many of the makeshift walls with messages varying from personal notes of affection to a listing of drug dealers. Finally, the posting of community notices is a common literacy practice. These include notices such as a list of people who still owe money for electricity (paid communally since the individual dwellings do not officially exist as homes with addresses) or an announcement of an upcoming religious service.

Parents of the children report a variety of literacy practices in their homes and daily lives. The following socio-textual activity domains emerged as those mediated by print use for the families: (a) Responding to Civic Rules and Regulations; (b) Participating in Community Life; (c) Cooking/Eating; (d) Participating in Clubs/Organizations; (e) Entertaining Oneself; Having Fun; (h) Participating in Family Life; (i) Maintaining Finances; (f) Attending to Health and Hygiene; (g) Acquiring or Disseminating Information/News; (h) Relating Interpersonally; (i) Maintenance of Tools and Home Environment; (j) Participating in Politics; (k) Participating in Spiritual Life; (l) Engaging in Self-Motivated Education/Personal Improvement; and (m) Working.

More than 100 different types of texts were observed or reported as being read or written by the children's parents (to varying degrees, depending on the level of education, occupations, and other life circumstances). Some examples include: Advertisements, Bibles, Bills, Books, Brochures, Calendars, Children's Homework; Community announcements; Cooking Magazines; Food Package Labels; Personal Letters; Official Letters; Product Usage Directions; Prayers; Immigration Documents; Magazines; Newspapers; Shopping Lists; and so on.

I documented at least 155 distinct purposes for which people read and write specific texts in their homes, the homes in which the children grow and develop early literacy understandings. Some of these include: To be informed about spiritual matters; to organize work needs; to document such things as being too sick for work or being exempt from paying rent; to enjoy written stories; to ensure that you buy what you need or want; to find out how much money is owed, to get information from groups of interest; to learn the news; to apply for a passport; to inform children of their chores; to advertise a service; to keep track of appointments; and so on.

Literacy Practices within the Classrooms

There was very little match between the texts that are written or read outside of school and those in school for the children. There was no match in terms of the functions for which the children read and wrote in school, with the exception of those 'unofficial

texts' that they brought from home (and read surreptitiously in the classrooms) like movie passes or trading cards. I analyzed the texts in school for their 'authenticity' which is the degree to which they are the same, or very similar, to texts that people read and write in life outside of school. I did the same for the functions for reading and writing the texts. For first grade, out of 76 different text types, 26% of the texts were authentic, and these consisted almost exclusively of those brought from home, although the numerous messages to parents were considered authentic as well. The remaining were rated as 'school-only' which means that they are texts that are specifically read or written for the sole purpose of learning to read and write. These include such texts as: Date Sentence on Board; Notebooks/T's Signature; Name Sentence on Board; Number Words on Worksheet; Printed Directions on Worksheet; Homework Notebooks; Español Notebooks; Estudios Sociales Notebook; Worksheets for Social Studies, Español, etc.; Alphabet Poster on Wall; Vowels on the Wall, and so on. The analysis of the functions (from the children's perspective) for reading and writing revealed that 27% were authentic, 65% were school-only, and 8% had no function at all for the children.

For second grade, out of 83 different text types, 30% were rated as authentic, including a book of short stories read by the teacher as well as a few textual items brought from home. The remaining 70% of text types, rated as 'school-only,' consisted of such texts as Worksheets; Homework Notebooks; Content Information on the Blackboard; Date Sentence on Board; Name Sentence on Board; Estudios Sociales Notebook; and Words on Board & Written in Syllables. Of the functions for reading and/or writing, 23% were rated as authentic, 65% as school-only, and 13% had no apparent function for the children.

The textual practices in the kindergarten class presented a different picture, reflecting I believe the greater emphasis on the whole child and the lack of direct literacy instruction at this level. For kindergarten, I documented a total of 49 different types of texts either brought to school by the children, used by the teacher with the children, used only by the teacher, or existing as part of the environment of the room. Of these 49 types, 63% were rated as authentic, and 37% as school-only. Forty percent of the reasons understood by the children for reading and writing these texts were rated as authentic, 33% as school-only, and 26% as non-functional from the children's perspective. An outstanding feature of kindergarten instruction in Costa Rica is the explicit ban on literacy instruction. Teachers are forbidden to teach even alphabet letters except in response to a child's question. As a result, there was very little print in the kindergarten classroom that the children noticed. However, in the classroom that I observed, the teacher was 'sneaking in' her own brand of early literacy teaching, using the date sentence (e.g., Today is February 6, 2006) that is ubiquitous in all Costa Rican classrooms and copied several times a day by children from grade one on up. The kindergarten teacher in this school would pull out words of the week and do word shapes lessons with them as well as activities involving finding similarities in the beginnings and endings of words.

Instructional Activities and Processes

It is important to realize that even with the authentic texts and reading/writing functions in the classrooms, 100% of those used by the teachers for instructional purposes were school-only, with the exception of the instances in second grade when the teacher would read stories to the children for their

enjoyment. An analysis of instructional activities across first and second grade revealed a preponderance of copying from the board, cutting and trimming worksheets and gluing them into content-area notebooks. This activity structure dominated the instruction in these two grades. I also documented two striking differences between the early literacy instruction in Costa Rica and that in the United States and Canada, and I interpret these as strengths of the Costa Rican system: (1) the emphasis on values, attitudes, and interpersonal relationships; and (2) the higher content load of the instruction; children in Costa Rican schools are learning about, discussing, and reading about much more complex and interesting topics than those of comparable age in the United States and Canada.

Early Literacy Assessments

The Concepts of Print assessment, Spanish reconstruction, is only normed for first graders. The scores of the first graders ($N = 28$) in this study revealed a low-average achievement level with the average stanine of 4.57. The scores of the Nicaraguan children in this class ($N = 7$) were higher, with the average stanine of 5.85. However, the average age (7.8) of the Nicaraguans was one year higher than for the Costa Ricans (6.9), reflecting, perhaps, the higher rate of grade repetition among the Nicaraguans. The scores on the writing vocabulary assessment, though, revealed a different picture. Both groups of children did poorly with a group average stanine of 1.89, Costa Ricans = 1.95, and Nicaraguans = 1.71.

Nicaraguan/Costa Rican Differences in Achievement in School

A major theme that arose from the analysis of the classroom observations and artifacts was the tricky nature, and power, of *perception of difference* that was belied by the *lack* of actual difference between the Nicaraguan children and the Costa Rican children, as a whole. Not only could I not differentiate between them according to their display of early literacy knowledge and skill, teachers and assistants (including my Costa Rican research assistants) also had difficulty identifying which children *were* Nicaraguan. This was apparent from their misidentification of them for purposes of my study. This ran counter to their assurance that everyone could identify a Nicaraguan from color of skin, manner of dress, language, and lack of preparedness for school.

Conclusions & Implications

This study, as an ethnography, is complex and far-reaching. Clearly more analysis is needed to more thoroughly address the larger issue of educational underachievement of socially and culturally marginalized groups. The clear finding of *misperception* of both educational deficiency as well as the scope of 'the problem' is a promising one for more analysis and study. For now, I can conclude that when looking only at early literacy knowledge, motivation, and performance, children of Nicaraguan immigrants do not seem any different from those of mainstream Costa Ricans, at least in this public school. It is possible, however, and this will be explored, that what we are looking at is an economic difference that actually falls between low-income Costa Rican *and* Nicaraguan children and high income Costa Ricans (who are attending private

schools). If this is so, however, it does not reflect the perceived realities of educators and ordinary Costa Ricans who believe that a social, cultural, moral, and educational rift of huge proportions exists between Costa Ricans and Nicaraguan immigrants, including their children.

Turning to the Ministry of Public Education for Costa Rica, and their interest in reducing the first grade repetition rate, especially for Nicaraguan children (again, all of my data suggests that the repetition rate for Costa Rican children is just as high), the findings of this analysis have clearer implications. We can think about these results against the background of previous research results, which are closely intertwined. First, previous research has demonstrated that children do not recognize that print is functional unless it is read or written for real life reasons (Purcell-Gates, 1995). One way to think about this from an instructional perspective is to recognize, for example, that print on the walls of the classroom is not seen as 'language' if it is not used/read for some real purpose. Rather it is viewed and treated as decorations. Second, previous research has demonstrated that reading and writing ability develops best if learners read and write real life (authentic) texts for real life (authentic) purposes (Purcell-Gates & Duke, in press; Purcell-Gates, et. al, 2002; Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, & Degener, 2004). Examples of authentic reading/writing for authentic purposes would be reading an information text to learn something new about the topic that the *reader* wants or needs to know, and writing directions for how to take care of a plant so that a real person can do this for a real-life situation (children won't be at school because of a vacation). Third, the more children experience people around them reading and writing (any kinds of texts), for real life reasons, the more they learn about the purposes for reading and writing and about the different ways that writing encodes meaning (Purcell-Gates, 1996). We can explore the results of this study against this background.

The results of this study are clearly indicating that (a) there are not enough authentic texts nor purposes for reading and writing them being used in the literacy instruction of the children in first and second grade; (b) there are many different types of literacy practices in the lives of the children outside of school that could be reflected in the literacy practices they encounter in school; and (c) the all-encompassing instructional practice of copying from the board, a practice that constitutes almost 100 per cent of the literacy learning time on task in first grade and 65% in second, appears to be clearly related to the outcomes of the early literacy assessments: (1) Average knowledge of basic concepts of print like 'letter,' 'word,' and so on; and (2) virtually no ability to compose written language.

These conclusions lead to several implications that can be explored for the purpose of instituting change that will be effective in raising the success rate, and reducing the retention rate, of poor and marginalized children in Costa Rica. I have already presented these to the Ministry of Education in Costa Rica and work is currently underway to implement them.

Implication 1: Literacy instruction should stress the connection between the texts and purposes for reading/writing them that children experience in their out-of-school lives and the texts/purposes being used for beginning literacy instruction. With knowledge from this study of what those out-of-school literacy practices are, teachers can

incorporate them into their instruction, ensuring that children, in addition to learning to read and write with explicit instruction in the skills, are reading real-life texts for real-life purposes. Even more important is the need to put much more focus into writing instruction that goes beyond *apresto* (readiness drills such as drawing lines between dots) and copying from the board. This will evolve naturally from an increased emphasis on authentic reading and writing in that the children will find themselves needing to write such authentic texts such as stories, lists, signs, and so on. This change will ensure that all of the children are working with familiar literacy practices in school and, thus, understand the relevance and motivation of learning to read and write in addition to gaining situated practice with applying the early literacy skills they are learning.

Implication 2: Schools should surround children who come from homes with limited text use with real life reasons for reading and writing and with real life texts for accomplishing those purposes. Teachers and others in the schools should also model reading and writing for real life purposes and make these events visible and explicit for the children. While the first implication is more appropriate for the first and second grades, this implication is relevant for the kindergarten curriculum. There are many ways of incorporating real-life texts into a whole-child curriculum without resorting to didactic literacy teaching. For example, play centers can be constructed such as pulperias or post offices that incorporate naturally occurring texts like signs, lists of items/prices, and instructions for depositing mail (which would need to incorporate the authentic literacy practice of writing letters or sending birthday cards, and so on). The writing assessment for kindergarten children revealed that only a few could write emergent versions of their names and none could write, or attempt to write, anything else. By engaging in play experiences in the classroom that incorporate authentic text use, these children will be able to begin to construct their early literacy concepts and abilities in ways that will allow them to take from and succeed with the literacy instruction they encounter in first grade.

I believe that these changes in the beginning literacy instruction in Costa Rican schools, combined with the already existing strengths of high-level and interesting information in the curriculum and the emphasis on values, attitudes, and interpersonal relationships, have an excellent chance of reducing the first-grade retention rate of poor and marginalized children and improving their performance in school as they continue in their schooling.

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