

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1. Discussion of Research Questions

In this section, the findings of the study are correlated with each of the three research questions presented in chapter one. After a brief review of the questions and the researcher's predictions as far as possible outcomes, results are discussed, including interpretations that attempt to provide logical explanations. The findings are also related to the trends and developments outlined in the literature review in the first chapter.

5.1.1. *Research Question #1: What attitudes do teachers, students, and parents hold toward different types of literacy and their importance? In what ways are these attitudes similar and/or different?*

As pointed out in section 1.3.1, the reason for investigating this research question was to identify and understand the attitudes and ideologies held by teachers, students, and parents, namely with respect to reading and writing in a specific Mexican context. Given that literacy practices are closely related to the local values of a specific society and culture (Barton, 1999), it was claimed that the participants' opinions and perspectives would play a significant role in the teaching/learning of reading and writing, both in the school as well as in the homes and community. This part of the study was modeled methodologically on that conducted by Rosales-Kufrin (1989), which compared the attitudes of students, teachers, and parents on the issue of first-language maintenance in the context of bilingual schooling in the United States.

It was predicted that the three groups interviewed as part of this project would express contrasting attitudes regarding types of literacy and their respective importance. Whereas the two teachers were predicted to express attitudes in favor of more academic

literacy, often limited to the school context, the six parents, and to a lesser degree, their children, were expected to be more supportive of local home and community literacies. Nevertheless, the findings suggested that all three groups were more or less in agreement and that they favored school-based reading and writing. Also, to a large extent, the parents' and children's opinions contradicted the actual practices reported to occur in their homes.

When asked whether reading was an important activity, all six of the case-study children responded affirmatively. They maintained that reading was "*divertido*" [fun] and that it served to "*aprender*" [learn] and to "*saber más información*" [acquire more information]. For example, Cristina stated, "*sí, me gusta mucho porque así puedo aprender más, puedo...saber...comprender lo que dicen esos libros...todo*" [Yes, I like it (reading) because that way I can learn more, I can...know...understand what the books say...everything]. All of the students said that they enjoyed reading.

The parents likewise claimed that reading was important. They replied that the purpose of reading was to learn and to know more. One parent, Susana, even commented that reading was a pleasurable way to spend one's time. These mothers told the researcher that children best learned to read by being encouraged (both at home and in school), by being given interesting material, and by constantly practicing. For instance, Susana said that parents and teachers should "*buscar la forma que ellos vean algo entretenido en la lectura...de los libros que les gustan mucho*" [find a way in which they (the children) see something entertaining in the reading...books that they really like]. They answered that a "good reader" was one who understood the main ideas, hence able to express what had been read, and that he or she made a habit of reading.

Correspondingly, all of them argued that comprehension was more important than speed given that it was useless to read quickly at the expense of understanding.

The teachers agreed with the parents in that the purpose of reading involved understanding the main ideas, or “*mensaje*” [message], of the text. They added that reading was an ideal way to expand vocabulary. Gertrudis, for example, commented that reading served to “*informarse sobre diversos temas...ampliar su vocabulario...sus ideas*” [become informed about different topics...expand their vocabulary...their ideas]. Octavio and Gertrudis also pointed out that people read to learn, and that individuals should be encouraged to read on a regular basis. As did the parents, they commented that comprehension was more important than speed, again asserting that understanding could not be sacrificed for fast reading. In their opinions, children best learned to read by memorizing the letters and combining syllables (Gertrudis) and by using their imagination and employing strategies such as focusing on key words and reading in chunks (Octavio).

With respect to writing, five out of the six students reported that they enjoyed this activity and that it was “*divertido*” [fun] for them. Cristina, who said that she did not like to write, told the researcher that her hand began to hurt after long periods of writing. One child, Alicia, replied that writing helped her to read. All of the students claimed that writing was important. They expressed that it was fun, a learning experience, necessary for school and work, and that everyone should be able to write stories. When questioned on spelling, handwriting, and accentuation, they mentioned that they were all an essential part of writing, especially considering that they were “*regañado*” [scolded] for most of their mistakes in these areas. Mario pointed out that “*el maestro (está) viendo y si le falta*

el acento, le tienes que decir. Nos regaña” [the teacher is looking and if you forget to put the accent, you have to tell him. He scolds us].

The parents gave varied responses when asked for a definition of a “good” writer. While some of them argued that anyone who expressed him/herself clearly could write, others claimed that only certain individuals were writers, specifically those who wrote books and magazines. Susana said that writing existed as an enjoyable pastime. Purposes for writing mentioned by the parents included communication, expression, legacies for future generations, and transmission of knowledge. When asked about spelling, accents, and handwriting, they replied that the first two were more important than the latter given that spelling and accent mistakes could cause a change in meaning, while there were many forms of acceptable handwriting. Several of these mothers admitted that, in general, errors in spelling and accentuation were “*molestos*”, or bothersome, for them.

Similarly, the teachers commented that spelling and accents were more important than handwriting given that errors in either could result in a change of word meaning. They pointed out that a “good” writer wrote clearly and that the aim of writing was to express one’s ideas as clearly and simply as possible, ultimately with the goal of communicating with others, whether family members (messages), clients (advertisements), or readers from the general public (magazines, newspapers, and novels).

The parents and teachers also agreed that school texts were different from home and community texts for several reasons. They claimed that the reading done at school was overall more “*cultural*” (Lucia), “*constructiva*” [constructive] (Ariana), and that “*tiene una enseñanza*” [it teaches something] (Carla). In contrast, texts commonly read in

the community, including magazines and comic books, were considered somewhat vulgar and lacking in instructional value. As far as writing, both groups asserted that at school the texts (i.e. summaries, compositions) were more academic and relatively varied, whereas at home and in the community the writings (i.e. grocery lists, advertisements, price records) were less professional, “limited”, and almost always directly related to their own personal lives. For example, Susana said, *‘pues yo pienso que en la escuela tienen más que escribir’* [Well, I think that at school there’s more to write].

The similarity of these groups’ perspectives on reading and writing appeared to be due to the fact that many of them had grown up, lived, and studied in the research context. Indeed, most of the parents and both of the teachers reported that they had resided in the local community for a number of years. In addition, the parents seemed to be in close contact with their children’s teachers, either through meetings, school activities, or by simply talking with them before or after school. For instance, both teachers commented during the interview sessions that they knew how important it was for the parents that they corrected the students’ written work. Octavio told the researcher that, in the past, parents had complained to him about the mistakes their children were making in their writing. In turn, the teachers reacted to these concerns by constantly correcting the children’s writing in the classroom. Thus, in all likelihood, community-wide ideologies existed as the source of local attitudes and beliefs concerning literacy and literacy instruction.

Interestingly, despite these common responses, it was found that they contradicted significantly with actual practice. As described in chapter four, classroom reading was quite limited and rarely involved reading for meaning or for pleasure. Instead, the

students tended to spend their time reading out loud to practice pronunciation of the letters, syllables, and words (first grade) or from dictations or copying activities (fourth grade), and reading de-contextualized letters, syllables, words off the board or from cards (first grade).

At home, the parents reported that most reading revolved around the children's homework assignments. In other words, the students seemed to be concentrating on the form much more than on the comprehension of actual ideas and messages, as reported in previous studies conducted in the area (Ballesteros, 2003; Jiménez et al., 2003; Kimbrough, 2004; Smith et al., 2002; Smith et al., 2003). Moreover, neither the teachers nor the parents encouraged reading using material that the children themselves had selected as interesting. That is, they failed to stimulate an environment in which reading could be perceived as an enjoyable activity performed recurrently as opposed to an obligation imposed from above by parents or teachers.

A great deal of the writing in the two classrooms consisted of copying, dictations, as well as simple texts such as names and the date (first grade). Indeed, writing beyond the word level was basically non-existent in the first grade and, in the fourth grade, almost always included a text which was merely copied or dictated; in other words, not to be discussed or applied as part of other activities. These practices contrasted somewhat with the attitudes and opinions reported by the children, parents, and teachers, all of whom agreed that written texts should express clear, meaningful ideas for communication. Similarly, Ferreiro (1989) and De la Garza and Ruiz Ávila (1994) have noted how Mexican school systems tend to focus on form over meaning.

The reason for the discrepancy between the participants' attitudes and actual practices may be best understood in terms of ideal conceptions of literacy. In other words, the respondents consistently provided favorable answers, perhaps those that they believed the researcher wanted to hear. To give an example, practically all of the children reported that they enjoyed reading and writing and likewise that both activities were important to them, although it is likely that these types of responses resulted from a weakness in the research design, particularly the interview protocols. Indeed, a few of the interview questions for the children required only a "yes" or "no" answer.

The parents and teachers also seemed to hold positive attitudes toward reading and writing. Given that Mexicans are frequently criticized for the low number of books and newspapers read annually (for example, Juárez, 2002 & Reyes Calderón, 2002, cited in Smith et al., 2002), it may be that the participants responded in a way to impress the researcher. Nonetheless, the notes from the observations, and even other questions from the interviews, demonstrated that reading and writing, as least among the case-study children, were typically limited to the school context and that, within this setting, most literacy activities centered on form as opposed to meaning.

Interestingly, no differences in responses were found based on the socio-economic status (SES) of the participants. The family classified as "low" SES (see chapter two) expressed the same positive attitudes as the others, whose calculated SES was somewhat higher. A possible explanation for this outcome is that the "low" SES family was only one point away from the "middle" category; in other words, their SES was actually not very different from that of the other participants (i.e. a total of 5 as opposed to 6). Moreover, all of the children had their own bedrooms, which supports the

idea that the families were not as dissimilar as the classification system described in chapter two might have implied. Given this resemblance, the attitudes and beliefs articulated by all the parents and children were related.

5.1.2. *Research Question #2: What do school, community, and family literacies have in common, and how do they differ?*

This question was intended to explore similarities and differences between literacy activities in three contexts: school, home, and community. According to Taylor (1998), everyday life can provide children with a richness of texts often unnoticed by educators. In her book she refers to home and community practices as “local” literacies, which indeed may contrast with those characteristic of the school. Another aim of researching this point was to identify funds of linguistic knowledge (Smith, 2001), with specific reference to reading and writing, which teachers could potentially integrate into classroom instruction.

The researcher had predicted that school literacy practices would turn out to be quite distinct from those in the homes and in the community. As mentioned in the previous section, other studies conducted in the same research context reported that while school literacy was found to be somewhat regulated, especially writing, local texts seemed to serve a communicative function in which the formal aspects drilled in the classroom were often overlooked (Jiménez et al., 2003).

As described in chapter four, the reading exercises observed in the school were almost completely limited to reading out loud (i.e. from the board, the Spanish book), along with reading activities based on cards and on the chalkboard. During the interviews, the teachers responded that the students in their classes read “*cuentos*” [stories], “*leyendas*” [legends], and “*fábulas*” [fables]. Octavio pointed out that he

sometimes asked the children to read newspapers, and Gertrudis claimed that her students checked out library books to be read in class. Despite these responses, it seemed as though this large variety of reading tasks, and even reading itself, was much less common than the teachers reported, at least in the literacy classes observed. Perhaps these activities took place during other parts of the school day and/or in other subjects.

Reading materials and time spent reading in the home setting were reportedly less frequent. Although the parents and children responded that at home they read stories and magazines, most of them clarified that most of the reading they did involved what was assigned for homework. Susana, for instance, said that in her home *‘por lo regular leemos lo de su tarea. Cosas de la escuela’* [usually we read her (Alejandra’s) homework. Things related to school]. A few of the parents told the researcher that their children enjoyed reading the text appearing on road signs and advertisements. Reading done by the parents was also quite limited and included magazine articles, newspapers, romance stories, and, rarely, books and novels. Many times these texts, particularly the books, were directly related to their professions. To give an example, Carla commented that she often read *“de mi profesión de enfermería, pues sí se requiere estar actualizándose, ¿no?”* [for my nursing profession, well one needs to keep up, don’t you think?].

Most of the respondents agreed that community reading practices were minimal. Indeed, both the parents and the teachers replied that reading was not a priority for the residents of the local community, due to a lack of time or interest or even laziness. According to them, the few texts actually read included newspapers, magazines, comic books (vulgar content), and cartoons. When asked whether or not these texts resembled

those commonly read at school, the participants argued that community reading material tended to be much more limited, vulgar, and “non-scholastic” in content (see quotes above).

Writing in the school consisted of dictations, copying, simple texts such as students’ names and the date, and the formation of single syllables or words with cut-out slips containing letters. During the interview Gertrudis replied that, in addition to the texts mentioned above, some of her (more advanced) students wrote short stories. Octavio said that the children in his class also wrote lots of descriptions and “*resúmenes*” [summaries]. Indeed, writing seemed to be much more prevalent than reading at both grade levels. As commented in chapter four, much of this writing was corrected and edited for form, similar to findings from other recent studies carried out in the same area (Ballesteros, 2003; Kimbrough, 2004).

In the children’s homes, writing appeared to occur much less frequently than at school. As with reading, most texts were reportedly related to homework assignments. Other student-produced writing consisted of drawings containing short texts (for siblings or parents), letters and numbers (the first-graders), messages, cards, and, according to one fourth-grader, stories about hummingbirds. Parents replied that they typically wrote texts having to do with their jobs, such as reports, notes, receipts, budgets, and inventories. Otherwise, home-based writing by parents and children was fairly uncommon.

Many of the participants claimed that writing in the community was basically non-existent. In their opinions, a large number of local residents had never learned to read or write and that those who knew how rarely did so. Gertrudis replied, for instance, that “*la mayoría de los adultos no sabe leer ni escribir...y, algunos que sí saben, no tienen el*

tiempo necesario para hacerlo” [most of the adults don’t know how to read or write...and those who do don’t have enough time for it]. Both teachers responded that, in most cases, only the students wrote in the home context, usually for purposes of completing homework. The parents commented that writing was generally limited to lists of things needed to be bought, advertisements, and graffiti. Tania reported that housewives like herself wrote “*su lista de, su lista de despensa que utilizan en la semana*” [their grocery, grocery list that they use during the week]. Parents added that these texts were very different from those written at school, especially since they were hardly ever formal and often contained mistakes in spelling, accentuation, and punctuation.

The findings of this study suggest that the frequency of reading and writing practices in the home and in the community was much less than at school. Likewise, in the school setting, writing was taught and practiced considerably more often than reading. It seems as though Serpell’s (1997:596) statement that parents “regard the cultivation of literacy as more the responsibility of school” applied in this context. Moreover, as mentioned in response to the first research question, the findings proved somewhat contradictory in that while the parents claimed to promote reading and writing as useful activities, neither they nor their children read or wrote on a regular basis and almost never for pleasure/enjoyment.

The parents and teachers provided several reasons explaining this low frequency of reading and writing. First, they asserted that as a result of long workdays and numerous other duties, like childcare and household chores, the time available to sit down to read or write was minimal. Likewise, many of the local residents were said to be

completely uninterested in literacy given that they saw no use for it in their lives (i.e. farmers). That is, participants assumed that these individuals were more concerned with earning money and providing for their families than with reading and writing. This interpretation appears to explain why most forms of reading and writing outside the school dealt directly with personal needs and professions (i.e. obligations). School, on the other hand, was perceived as a place where a variety of literacy practices were expected and acceptable. Last, as pointed out by some of the mothers who participated in this study, reading was not encouraged within families, and, for this reason, most of the children had not been socialized in a society in which reading was particularly valued.

Both the teachers and parents believed that the children should learn to write “correctly”. Perhaps they considered that it was important to stress conventional handwriting, spelling, accentuation, and punctuation so that the students would not be labeled later as “uneducated”. Indeed, during the second interview with some of the parents, they commented that they expected their children to learn to write “properly” because someone who made errors was perceived negatively in society. Octavio pointed out that he felt a great deal of pressure from the parents to practice and correct writing in the classroom, and this was one of the reasons why he constantly monitored their work for form.

Regarding the prediction that teachers would view home and community texts as unacceptable or “lower” forms of literacy, for the most part the findings suggested that this hypothesis was accurate. Although both teachers claimed that they made an attempt to incorporate local texts into classroom instruction, the notes from the observations showed otherwise. In fact, as described in chapter four, only a very limited number of

instances of using local funds of linguistic knowledge as a resource were documented. The data from the interviews seemed to indicate that these local texts were typically seen as “vulgar”, “non-constructive”, “of no learning value” and “poorly written”, namely by the parents. Carla, for example, commented that community texts were “*para empezar...mal escrito, no? Mucha falta de ortografía....Son temas...cómo podemos decir, corrientes*” [to begin with...poorly written, no? Lots of spelling mistakes...They are...how would we say it...simple topics].

Perhaps the teachers were aware of the parents’ perception of local texts and practices and thus chose not to include them as part of what they taught in the classroom. In other words, not only did parental pressure drive the teachers to constantly monitor the form of their children’s writing, it similarly may have led them to focus on traditional school-related literacy, including dictations, copying, and reading aloud for “proper” pronunciation. These findings and interpretations are discussed further in the next section.

5.1.3. *Research Question #3: To what extent does the school integrate home and community literacies in the classroom (i.e. local funds of linguistic knowledge)?*

This question was meant to explore whether the teachers were aware of community resources that could be tapped for use in the literacy classroom, and likewise whether they actually took advantage of them. It has been argued that such local funds of linguistic knowledge (FOLK), specifically the knowledge and skills the children bring with them to school, can bridge the gap between concrete experiences (with which the students are familiar) and more abstract, academic practices (Moll et al., 2002). Given the commonly-reported low academic achievement in public schools in Mexico, much of

which is probably a result of a mismatch between home and school settings (Pérez, 1998), it seemed worthwhile to investigate this question throughout the research.

The researcher hypothesized that since, in all likelihood, educators would fail to recognize local literacy practices as legitimate, they would also exclude such forms of reading and writing from instruction. Indeed, based on the findings of previous studies conducted in this area (Ballesteros, 2003; Jiménez et al., 2003; Kimbrough, 2004; Smith et al., 2003), it was predicted that school-based literacy would tend to focus on more formal aspects of the language, presented in the SEP textbook, as opposed to giving students the opportunity to work with communicative texts existing in their everyday lives. All in all, these assumptions were present, given that only a limited number of instances of FOLK were documented. Nonetheless, it seemed as though both of the teachers had the familiarity with the resources and family contacts to incorporate this knowledge if so desired.

As described in chapter four, there was only one example documented of a reading exercise in which the students made use of a community text. Octavio had instructed each child to locate and bring in a newspaper, and class time was spent discussing the different sections comprising newspapers and, subsequently, reading out the titles and parts of articles (i.e. focus on form). The students appeared to enjoy this activity, perhaps because it was something new for them. Although Gertrudis reported during an interview that she often had the first-graders to check out books from the library, read them, and then talk about them in class, this practice was never observed. According to her, these texts were chosen based on their personal interests.

Funds of linguistic knowledge related to writing were likewise scarce. As mentioned in the results, all of these instances occurred in the fourth grade. On at least two occasions, Octavio told his students to consult with their parents about *adivinanzas* [riddles] and *trabalenguas* [tongue-twisters], which they were required to write for homework. During another visit, the assignment was to make a poster advertising an event in or around the school. The students, who completed the task either individually or in pairs, presented their work to the rest of class without being corrected by the teacher, albeit having made numerous errors in spelling, accentuation, and punctuation (example: *necesitados* written incorrectly as *nececitados*). Clearly, the texts they created resembled the community texts around them much more than the ones produced at school. Finally, Octavio once instructed the children to use a newspaper as a model to write similar articles dealing with local topics. The children were probably already familiar with these materials/texts, although perhaps not with the tasks themselves.

While school materials/texts included the SEP textbook, the chalkboard, and cards, those commonly found outside the school were newspapers, magazines, comic books, road signs and cartoons. Octavio commented during one of the interviews that he would sometimes ask the fourth-graders to bring books from home for discussion in class. However, similar to what Gertrudis said about the library books, this practice was not documented. As far as writing reported in the observations, while at school the students produced letters, syllables, words, and sentences for the purpose of learning to write “correctly”, at home and in the community most of the writing (besides homework) consisted of grocery lists, advertisements, sales receipts, and graffiti. The latter consisted of things directly related to the families’ lives. In other words, whereas much of the

writing done at school was copied or dictated, that taking place outside the school was performed for authentic communication. Accordingly, considerably more emphasis on form was observed in the classrooms.

When asked if the teachers talked to them about their reading and writing interests outside the school, five of the six students replied that the only time Octavio and Gertrudis discussed literacy was in relation to homework. The only exception was Cristina, who told the researcher that since she was fascinated by hummingbirds, she had once turned in a written description about them as an assignment. She also mentioned during the interview that she had talked with her teacher about her interest in birds.

A few of the parents replied that, in their opinion, the teachers knew their children quite well. According to them, considering that the teachers had spent lots of time with the students, it was obvious that they had established a certain relationship with them. Furthermore, the mothers claimed that they themselves would often take a moment to chat with either Octavio or Gertrudis in the morning when they dropped off their children or else in the afternoon when they returned to pick them up. Last, they pointed out that the teachers always checked the students' homework and, in that way, learned more regarding each individual's needs.

The parents likewise expressed that knowing their children was important in that, based on each one's personal interests and experiences, classroom instruction could be more enriching, reinforcing, and meaningful. Octavio and Gertrudis gave basically the same answer, although they admitted that they had not made an effort to draw on local reading and writing practices at school. They also told the researcher that they had never visited their students' homes. From a FOLK perspective, it would be necessary for them

to realize the importance of these visits and to be trained methodologically to document the knowledge and skills of their students while in this context.

Therefore, it appeared to be the case that both the teachers and parents were familiar with local literacy practices, even though these resources were rarely integrated into the school curriculum. Interestingly, there seemed to be many opportunities in which the educators could have discovered existing funds of linguistic knowledge. First, according to the mothers, there was constant contact between the parents and teachers on a daily basis. Thus, the teachers could have taken advantage of this time to question the parents about their children's reading habits and interests. This information could have influenced the selection of future class discussions and assignments. Second, both Octavio and Gertrudis were residents in the local community. Thus, they had first-hand knowledge of the reading and writing done outside the school. In fact, during their interviews each one of them provided an in-depth description of the kinds of texts typically read and produced in the homes and in the community. Last, both teachers had attended talks describing the larger study at the school and were given the chance to learn more about FOLK, including its definition and applications, as well as examples of local community texts.

Another of the researcher's predictions was that the first-grade teacher would make more of an effort to incorporate FOLK texts in the classroom, particularly given that her students were just beginning to learn to read and write. In other words, at least for those who did not choose to attend pre-school, this was their first year of school and probably their first real exposure to academic literacy. Hence, it was hypothesized that Gertrudis would bridge the gap by relating new types of reading and writing to situations

with which they were already familiar (i.e. as one girl reported, reading from a cereal box).

Nevertheless, as already mentioned, the few instances of FOLK that were observed took place only in Octavio's fourth-grade classroom. One possible explanation for this outcome is that Octavio had been teaching in the school much longer than Gertrudis, and perhaps over the years he had become more knowledgeable regarding the students' lives and interests. Additionally, he commented that he wished to cover the curriculum set by the SEP, which included having students to read and to be able to describe a variety of texts such as newspapers and advertisements. Significantly, these texts were not included in the textbook itself and thus required the teacher to look for supplementary materials. Gertrudis, on the other hand, may have elected to introduce her students to academic literacy all at once.

Despite the examples described above, the results suggested that both of the teachers were somewhat resistant to using possible funds of linguistic knowledge in their classrooms. As Lewis (2001) indicates, some forms of literacy are more dominant and influential, specifically those generally found in the context of the school, and apparently Octavio and Gertrudis chose to center most of their instruction of reading and writing on such academic practices. One interpretation could thus be that these educators felt that local texts were not appropriate at school (Whitehouse & Colvin, 2001). Indeed, among the school's missions is that of providing educational opportunities to those children who have been unsuccessful in other schools. Perhaps the two participating teachers decided that, in order to accomplish this goal, it was necessary to base instruction on more

academic forms of literacy. However, such a strict focus on the acquisition of standard conventions meant that the children were rarely allowed to express their own ideas.

Similarly, with reference to the preference of form over meaning in writing, the findings implied that the teachers had decided to hone the basic writing skills, including handwriting, spelling, accentuation, and punctuation, before allowing the children to produce more authentic, communicative texts. That is, it could have been that their objective was to “train” students to write in accordance with academic conventions as a prerequisite to employing this knowledge in actual texts. Moreover, as commented earlier, it seemed as though the teachers felt intense pressure from the parents to monitor and correct student writing for form. It is imperative to note that the funds of linguistic knowledge that educators could tap for instruction are, in some cases, invisible to the parents, and, in others, regarded by the mothers themselves as lower forms of literacy which would not be acceptable in an academic context.

5.2. Limitations of Study

One of the limitations of this study centered on its generalizability. More specifically, given that it was conducted in only two classrooms (first and fourth grades) in a single, semi-private school, the findings cannot be assumed to be applicable to other grade levels and to other academic settings within Mexico. Likewise, all the classes observed were intended to teach reading and writing (i.e. language arts). Considering the prevalence of literacy instruction in the first and fourth grades, it may be that many of the teaching techniques observed throughout this project were uniquely characteristic of these particular levels and classes, or even only of language arts instruction. Teachers of

other subjects and age groups may choose to focus more on the content, such as history, mathematics, or music, than on the language itself. Also, they may have different ways of viewing/working with literacy. Future research would need to compare the results with those obtained in all the settings mentioned above.

Another limitation of the investigation was that, due to reasons of access, there were a disproportionate number of observations between the two classrooms. Octavio made it very clear to the research team that visits should be limited to a particular day of the week at a specific time. If his students had exams, other activities, or last-minute schedule changes during that period, none of which was unusual, the observation session was automatically canceled for that week. Had the researcher been allowed more access to this classroom, it is likely that more instances of FOLK would have been documented.

Gertrudis, on the other hand, permitted the researcher to sit in on any of her literacy classes, regardless of the day or time and including unannounced visits. Moreover, during the last two months of data collection (February and March), the researcher began carrying out all his observations (two per week) in the first grade. Although it had been planned that another member of the larger project would do the same in the fourth grade, access was never obtained during the course of the study. As a result, 22 observations were conducted in the first grade as opposed to only 9 in the fourth grade. (The other nine visits were spent documenting texts on the school grounds). Thus, the findings from Gertrudis' class were more substantiated.

A third limitation involved the relatively small number of interviews. Given that one of the major goals of this study was to document local beliefs and attitudes toward literacy and literacy instruction, it would have been ideal to interview more than six

parents, six children, and two teachers. Obviously, it cannot be certain whether these participants' views match those of other community members, even though data from the linguistic census suggest that the sample is quite representative of other families in the school. Also, although the interview protocol included questions regarding transnational status, its effects on the perceptions and uses of literacy was not explored in those families who reported having relatives abroad (United States, Chile, Spain).

Similarly, due to the reasons outlined in chapter two, all the parents interviewed were mothers. The fathers' perspectives, which may have yielded different findings, were considered only indirectly through the mothers' comments, particularly during the focus-group interview. Although it may be that the fathers were not very involved in the children's education (this seemed to be the consensus among the mothers), their attitudes regarding literacy are equally important for a more complete understanding of the local ideologies which influence how diverse forms of reading and writing are taught and perceived, especially since they hold jobs outside the home. For instance, given that many of the fathers who responded to the linguistic census were white-collar professionals (i.e. lawyers, doctors, professors, astrologists), they might tend to favor critical and/or analytical approaches toward literacy. If this position were true and they were aware of what the children were learning at school, they might convince their wives (and perhaps teachers) to be less adamant about mechanical, form-based instruction. These differences, if they exist, would certainly play a role in how children come to perceive literacy and, accordingly, how they learn to read and write.

Fourth, one significant aspect that possibly affected the interview responses was the researcher's gender and background. All of the participating parents were Mexican

females, only one of whom had completed a college degree. In contrast, the researcher was a white male from the United States who was completing a master's degree in a local, prestigious university. Accordingly, it is probable that the parents, and perhaps even the two teachers, felt somewhat intimidated by the presence of a previously unknown researcher. These factors may have affected the nature of the information they shared during the interviews, particularly if they decided to tell the researcher what they thought he wanted to hear (see discussion in section 5.1.1). One solution would have been to spend more time with each of the families in order to get to know them better before conducting the interviews (Seidman, 1998).

Moreover, in addition to the interviews conducted with parents, teachers, and students, it would also have been worthwhile to talk with school officials and other community members. The school officials might have been more qualified than the teachers to express the rationale behind the institution's views on literacy, especially at the level of curriculum. Even though an interview with the founder of the school was contemplated, it was never carried out due to a lack of time. Also, talking with other community members not directly associated with the Centro Telpochcalli may have either supported or challenged the study's findings, particularly with reference to local attitudes and ideas about forms of literacy present (or not) in the community and in the school.

Last of all, the study's findings would have been enriched if the researcher had had the opportunity to see more examples of environmental texts in the homes. In a researcher-guided interaction, the participants could have commented on these texts (i.e. which ones were important to them and why) in order to uncover their beliefs and

attitudes toward different types of literacy. Indeed, only one example of such writing was documented, specifically a picture of Jesus Christ containing the text *Nuestro Señor* [Our Lord] hanging in a living room, and the presence of the text was simply noted without any form of discussion. The decision not to intrude on the families in this way limited the results in that it could not be certain what kinds of texts actually existed in the children's homes and for what purpose.

5.3. Implications

The results and analysis of this study yielded various implications related to the two classrooms observed, the overall school curriculum, and the connection between school and community. Detailed below, the purpose of these ideas is to suggest alternative ways in which reading and writing may be taught at the Centro Telpochcalli and, by extension, in other similar schools within Mexico.

As far as reading, one suggestion is that the two participating teachers (and others) could choose books and other reading materials which drew on their students' personal interests and activities. Although Gertrudis pointed out that the stories in the SEP textbook were appropriate for the level of the children in her class, for example, these readings could be supplemented with outside resources selected by the students themselves (i.e. things their parents had bought them or that they had checked out from the school or community library, to which they already have access). In this way, the children would be more likely to enjoy the topics, and they might be more motivated to read. Similarly, teachers in the school could ensure that everyday included a special time for reading by setting aside 30 minutes to an hour during which the children were asked

to read a text of their choice. If the school promoted reading activities in this fashion, then the students might begin reading more on their own.

As mentioned in chapter four, most of the reading tasks observed were designed with the aim of learning to read as opposed to reading to learn. Teachers should discuss what has been read and encourage learners to apply this newly-gained knowledge to real-life situations. For instance, the fourth-graders could read about different academic disciplines and then create a list of interview questions for professionals in these fields based on the information. Subsequently, they could interview a teacher, a doctor, or a lawyer, for example, and make a presentation to the rest of the class. Moreover, these types of activities would show the children how reading and writing are interrelated and how one process supports the other. Although similar ideas are present in the SEP Spanish books, it appears as though the teachers ignore them. It could also be that the teachers have not been trained to use the SEP materials for literacy.

The reading done in class and for homework should also be much more varied. The data suggested that most school-related reading consisted of short, simple texts such as individual letters, syllables, and decontextualized words (first grade) and words and sentences with the objective of understanding grammar in the fourth grade. Depending on the grade level, teachers could integrate newspapers, adventure stories, magazine articles, internet excerpts, community advertisements, and short novels, to name a few examples. As noted in chapter four, Octavio used these types of texts, specifically newspapers, on only one occasion. This variation would make the reading more interesting and, equally important, more challenging for the learners. As before, all these exercises should be selected with a clear purpose and usefulness for the students' lives.

With respect to writing, educators could make more of an attempt to balance the formal, mechanical aspects of text production with student freedom and creativity. The findings revealed that a great deal of writing in the school context centered on copying and dictations, what Barton (1999) refers to as “scribal” functions. Aside from being tedious for the children, these practices are largely decontextualized in nature. Indeed, Carrasco Altamirano (2003) comments that most school literacy practices in Mexico are restricted to the school context and hence have little or no application in the real world. Allowing students to produce writing creatively would demonstrate to them the importance of meaningful communication. It would also encourage them to write about topics that interested them, both in and out of school.

Likewise, at least some of the writing activities performed at school should be related to the educational and professional contexts in which the learners might one day find themselves. In other words, texts produced in the elementary school classroom should be intended to prepare learners for what they will encounter at the middle and high-school levels and as prospective employees in an increasingly competitive job market. In fact, much of the writing that the children are learning to do not only deemphasizes meaning, it also places them at a disadvantage regarding future opportunities, which, according to the school’s mission, include empowering learners to become productive and independent members of society (clearly requiring a high level of functional literacy). That is, although the school (see chapter two) claims to “promote cultural, human, intellectual, economic, and social development through education and material resources”, its current literacy practices, reduced in large part to the basic skills,

may in reality be holding students back, given that they are not permitted to use literacy as a tool for learning.

Additionally, instead of scolding students for having bad handwriting or for making mistakes in pronunciation, spelling, accentuation, and/or punctuation, educators should treat these errors as natural phases in the development of ‘good’ readers and writers. Indeed, it was obvious throughout the study that neither Octavio nor Gertrudis consistently followed these writing conventions (similar to findings in Ballesteros, 2003 and Kimbrough, 2004), so it only follows that they should not have expected perfection from the children in their classrooms. Learning of any type and of any subject is a gradual process. Significantly, it seems as though control over writing may be more of an issue than simply abiding by prescriptive conventions (Bourdieu, 1991).

Another suggestion is that teachers value students’ efforts to write by displaying their texts in the classroom and throughout the school. Neither of the two participating teachers regularly displayed work produced by the children, and perhaps this practice made the students feel that what they wrote was not worthy of being seen publicly, either because they were thought to make many mistakes or because they were simply not considered to be capable writers. Displaying these texts would serve as a form of praise for the learners, and it would emphasize what they were able to do instead of what they could not do. Even though there was a considerable display of student work on the school grounds, most of it was done by middle- or high-school students, perhaps because their writing was assumed to be more “perfect”.

Another way that might improve literacy instruction in the school would be to offer educational workshops (in addition to those already given by other members of the

research team). Teachers, school officials, and parents could be invited to these sessions in order to share ideas about reading and writing practices in the homes, school, and community, especially suggestions as to how to promote literacy development among the children. These forums would allow a discussion of the many different types of literacy in the community and would hopefully convince both teachers and parents that all forms of reading and writing are acceptable in certain contexts. It would likewise be a good opportunity for teachers to learn more about home and community literacy practices and, at the same time, for parents to learn more about academic literacy.

Similarly, teachers could take advantage of the moments they have to speak with the parents (before and after class) to ask them about the interests and needs of their children. Based on the responses, teachers could design literacy tasks permitting and encouraging students to use their prior knowledge and experiences (FOLK). For instance, if a child were fascinated with hummingbirds (as was Cristina in the fourth-grade), the teacher could create a lesson or thematic unit on birds, which included reading, discussion, writing, and perhaps a short presentation. Although it is probably not feasible to base assignments on the topics of interest of each student, the teacher could find out what types of materials are interesting to the majority of the children in the class.

As mentioned in section 5.1.3, one obstacle in implementing funds of linguistic knowledge in the classrooms was that the parents themselves perceived many home and community literacy practices as unacceptable in the school setting. For instance, they commented that community texts were often poorly written, non-constructive, vulgar, and of little educational content. In order to begin to change these attitudes, teachers would need to become explicitly aware of local resources and then attempt to convince

the parents of their value by discussing specifically what the children could learn from them (i.e. an awareness of who reads and writes different kinds texts for what purposes). They could also describe to them how working with familiar practices serves child learners as a bridge to academic literacy.

Along the same lines, educators could invite professionals from the community (i.e. doctors, lawyers, businessmen) to come in the classrooms and talk about how they make use of reading and writing on a daily basis. In this fashion, the children would see the connection between what they are learning and what they might be expected to do in the future. Likewise, the students could be instructed to analyze different texts found in the local community (i.e. newspapers, advertisements, billboards), specifically with reference to author, message, purpose, and audience. This kind of assignment would raise their awareness of a variety of writing practices and also push them to think critically about who writes and for what reasons.

5.4. Suggestions for Future Research

Considering the limitations of this study (outlined in section 5.2), as well as interesting issues which arose throughout the duration of the project, this section proposes several suggestions regarding future research on school, home, and community literacy practices.

First, it would be useful to carry out qualitative studies of this type in other schools in Mexico, including at different grade levels (i.e. not only first and fourth) and in diverse regions of the country. The findings of this research could be compared and contrasted with those of the present study (as well as with those of Ballesteros, 2003,

Jiménez et al., 2003, Kimbrough, 2004, and Smith et al., 2003), with the ultimate aim of identifying important similarities and/or differences between school literacy practices throughout the nation.

Similarly, future research on literacy could compare reading and writing practices at distinct levels of instruction – elementary, middle, high school, and university – in order to explore how what is taught at one level facilitates or impedes subsequent learning. In other words, is there a gradual and logical progression of literacy activities throughout formal schooling? Peredo Merlo (2003) claims that elementary and middle-school curriculums in Mexico tend to focus literacy instruction on routine, mechanical activities that require minimal development of knowledge and learning skills. According to her findings, based on what participants who had reached different levels of formal public schooling were able to recall from their own educational experiences, it is not until high school that Mexican students are encouraged to reflect, analyze, interpret, and synthesize written material. Thus, it would be useful to compare and contrast literacy practices across grade levels (i.e. *primaria*, *secundaria*, *preparatoria*, and *educación superior*).

Another related suggestion is that researchers could conduct longitudinal studies analyzing the reading and writing challenges that Mexican students face as they advance through school. One way to accomplish this task would be to select a few case-study students and to document these learners' progress during three or four years. It is important to mention that the larger project (Smith et al., 2002) will continue to focus on the six case-study children described in the present study.

It would likewise be interesting to carry out research exploring the most common school-based literacy practices in different parts of Latin America. The results of these studies could be compared and contrasted with research in Mexico, in the United States, and in other places such as Europe, especially given that literacy policies and instruction in Latin America are often influenced by research carried out in the latter (Seda-Santana, 2000). Significantly, it is predicted that contextual differences would result in distinct forms of reading and writing in each setting, prompting the need for a re-examination of local policy and practice.

As far as research on home literacy, one suggestion is that future qualitative studies include interviews with both parents. As mentioned in section 5.2, one of the limitations of this project was that the fathers' perspectives were obtained indirectly through comments made by the mothers. Both parents' views are important in documenting a more complete picture of values related to literacy and, consequently, of context-specific literacy instruction. Moreover, researchers investigating home literacy practices should make an effort to spend a great deal of time with the families in their homes (González et al., 1993; González, 1995; Moll & González, 1994, 1998). In this way they could get to know the participants and, simultaneously, observe first-hand the actual types of reading and writing that occur in this setting. It would also be important to explore the effects of transnationalism on attitudes toward certain literacy practices.

Researchers could also study the types of literacy knowledge and skills that Mexican children acquire prior to beginning the first grade. More specifically, they could observe literacy practices in the homes of pre-school age children, focusing on those practices in which the children were actively involved. Furthermore, researchers could

continue to document the most frequent literacy practices in Mexican pre-schools (Kimbrough, 2004) and identify whether and how these activities serve as a stepping stone for the formal reading and writing typically introduced in the first grade.

With respect to community literacy, researchers could conduct qualitative studies in which they observed the literacy practices which take place in different parts of the community, such as in libraries, parks, and on buses and metros. The findings of such investigation could be compared and contrasted with the reading and writing that participants actually report doing. Other similar studies could document the types of literacy that occur in urban versus rural contexts, as well as in indigenous communities and/or as a function of socio-economic status (SES). Considering that literacy is closely intertwined with social and cultural phenomena (Barton, 1999), important differences are likely to be discovered.

5.5. Concluding Remarks

This study has attempted to compare the attitudes toward literacy held by teachers, parents, and children in a Mexican elementary school. It has likewise described many of the most common reading and writing practices in the school as well as in the children's homes and surrounding community. It is important for local literacy educators to be aware of these beliefs and of this diversity of practices since classroom instruction will greatly profit by recognizing, valuing, and drawing upon the knowledge, skills, and experiences that students already bring with them to the learning process. The final chapter of this project has provided a number of ideas with which teachers may wish to

experiment, in addition to suggestions for useful future research in areas related to school, home, and community literacy.