Yes, We Can: 
Adult literacy, Community, and Development in Peri-urban Oaxaca 

by 
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B.A. (Hons., Anthropology), McMaster University, 2004 

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Abstract

Global efforts to eradicate illiteracy have led to an extensive range of adult literacy programs worldwide, particularly in developing regions. There is no clear consensus on the application of such projects, as the study and evaluation of adult literacy education continues to be divided between ‘functional’ approaches which emphasize skill acquisition as a primary focus; and ‘socio-cultural’ perspectives which foreground contextual and personal narratives. Case-study observations of classrooms and educators in three peri-urban communities in Oaxaca, Mexico indicate complex interconnections between literacy education and development in both conceptual and material frameworks. Findings further highlight the importance of local communities and social networks in shaping classroom experiences. Results suggest a divide between institutionally derived goals and communally guided practice in Oaxacan adult literacy classrooms. This schism may lead to the creation of titular literacy that can be nevertheless inconsistent with the ways in which literacy is actually practised.

Keywords: Adult literacy; literacy studies; international development; praxis; teaching methods; urbanization
Dedication

For my parents, without whose help, encouragement, and good humour this project would never have been completed. For the thousands of Cuban teachers who yearly leave families and friends behind to improve the lives of students around the world. Finally, for Lesbia, a friend and constant source of advice, inspiration and excellent coffee throughout the research process.
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The program is like an alebrije, it can take many forms once you begin to work it.

- IEEA Coordinator
Chapter 1.

Introduction

After the close of the United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization’s (UNESCO) proclaimed ‘decade of literacy’, adult literacy education around the globe continues to present serious challenges to educators, policy makers and researchers alike. One of the central problems addressed by contemporary educators and educational researchers is the question of adult literacy in developing regions such as Latin America. Despite repeated efforts to eradicate illiteracy by UNESCO, USAID (United States Agency for International Development), the World Bank, and the OAS (Organization of American States) among others, the problem persists in the region (Schugurensky and Myers 2001). At the same time, educational policy and practice around the world are coming under increasing scrutiny and revision as a result of the changing nature of globalization in relation to local realities. Although the majority of adult literacy programs in Latin America continue to be rooted in pedagogy espoused by development agencies from the global North and linked to neoliberal policies and reforms (Hamel and Francis 2006; Levinson 2005; Flores and Lankshear 2000; Tato 1999; Torres and Schugurensky 1994), many nations increasingly are experimenting with alternative models developed through regional cooperation with other Latin American governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and theorists (Austin 1999).

The importance of understanding adult literacy initiatives in this shifting global domain is particularly salient in a nation such as Mexico, which currently is restructuring large portions of its educational system as part of a wider move towards decentralization (Rangel and Thorpe 2004). In the case of Mexico, attempts at reform are further mediated by a host of intermediary factors, from established systems of educational resource distribution to recently negotiated constitutional amendments at both national and state levels. The southern Mexican state of Oaxaca captures the complexity of this
situation particularly well, as the implementation of adult literacy education requires careful navigation between government mandates, local political trajectories, union politics, community interests, and sovereignty rights granted under the San Andres Accords and the reformulation of the Oaxacan constitution in 1995 (Anaya Munoz 2005). When viewed together with the politically fragmented and ethno-linguistically diverse character of the state (Clarke 2000), it becomes immediately apparent that adult literacy in Oaxaca is neither taught nor understood according to a singular approach. In this terrain, literacy educators find themselves at the nexus of shifting and often competing interests and perspectives on pedagogy, policy, and practice (Tatto 1999). However, despite the implications these observations have for the form of actual literacy programs and attempts to ‘eradicate illiteracy’, Mexican teachers themselves have rarely been the focus of research in academic studies of adult literacy.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships between Oaxacan literacy educators, the students and communities with whom they work, and the programs and administrative structures through which their efforts are structured and enacted. By placing educators at the centre of inquiry, the processes through which they negotiate the often complex intersections between institutional and local knowledge frameworks come into focus. This is significant for understanding the actual forms and applications of adult literacy programs as experienced by students, as well as the professional growth of educators themselves. This encompasses not only formal training and practical experience, but also the generation of new teaching strategies, social roles within and beyond the classroom, and understandings of literacy more broadly. In this sense, ‘growth’ is not intended to imply linear or causal progress towards fixed objectives, but rather as a signifier of change, which in itself may be enacted through participatory engagement and reflection. Essentially, the research aimed to explore how Oaxacan educators develop conceptions and practices related to literacy through their participation in an adult literacy program; and how this affects the form of the classrooms in which they teach, as well as the experiences of their students and the success or failure of the program itself.

To accomplish this, this paper will first review a variety of recent academic literature and broad theoretical discussions on literacy from multiple disciplines (Chapter 2); considering adult literacy both conceptually and in relation to current trends in
Mexico. This will establish a contextual foundation upon which to present findings, and suggest a theoretical orientation that seeks to address specific gaps in contemporary academic approaches to the study of literacy. Next, it will introduce a brief discussion of the methodology, research sites, and participants involved in the research (Chapter 3); highlighting some of the diverse ways in which literacy programs are situated in relation to institutional, methodological, local, and personal frames of reference. Presentation of the findings will begin with a deliberation on the ties between adult literacy education and the concept of ‘development’ (Chapter 4); illustrating prevalent statistical definitions of literacy, and suggesting that literacy can become conceptually implicated with developmental frameworks in peri-urban communities. The findings then turn to a consideration of the social and experiential aspects of participation in adult literacy programs (Chapter 5); demonstrating the importance of personal histories, social networks, and community production in the shaping of literacy classes and experiences within them. Finally, the paper presents a series of discussions on the significance of these findings (Chapter 6); arguing that methodological and conceptual interplay between institutional and local forms of knowledge can lead to a broadening of the definitions and experiences of literacy; and that even institutionally defined literacy can come to have wider social value. These conclusions are followed by a series of reflections on their significance for broader policy considerations and academic debates.
Chapter 2.

Literacy in Contemporary Theory and Practice

In the past few decades, there has been a considerable amount of scholarly attention devoted to the study of adult education and literacy. This research has not been confined to educational studies and related disciplines, as authors from a wide range of perspectives are asking what can be learned from engagement with educational policy and practice. Historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and statisticians alike (to name a few) have turned to adult literacy education as a fruitful arena for the discussion of theoretical, methodological, and practical issues within their disciplines. Nor has this interest been expressed solely by academics, with policy makers, activists, and authors from a large array of institutions and organizations adding to debates that have arisen around various aspects of adult literacy education. These debates are of critical relevance to the present and future forms of literacy programs around the world because they not only inform but also involve administrators, educators and students alike.

This chapter will examine some of the dominant contemporary models of literacy education in theory and practice, considering two divergent approaches to framing literacy: A ‘functional’ model which focuses on narrowly defined literacy capacities, and underscores the utility of literacy for national and regional development (2.1); and a ‘sociocultural’ model which emphasizes the importance of local context in understanding both literacy practices and the objects of literacy education (2.2). Next, the discussion frames the contemporary ‘problem’ of illiteracy in Mexico, highlighting contemporary trends and thematic tendencies in adult literacy research about the nation (2.3). Finally, a theoretic position is advanced which focuses on educators and their role in understanding the praxis of literacy education (2.4).
2.1. The Literacy Thesis: Functional literacy, the IALS and International Development

Perhaps one of the most well-known, if not most controversial, approaches to adult literacy in the past few decades is exemplified in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). Originally developed in the 1990s by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the survey was intended as a functional tool for the rapid statistical assessment of literacy skills in adults (Darcovich 2000; Statistics Canada 2000). Though the theoretical framework of the survey closely mirrored other similar statistical tools of the time, the IALS has been praised for two specific features of its design. First, its international scope meant that it was applied to people from a variety of nations and ethno-linguistic groups. Secondly, it was intended to measure varying degrees of literacy skill in several different ‘functional domains’ of literacy, in contrast to statistical approaches which only evaluate a person as ‘literate’ or ‘illiterate’. Evaluated on a sliding scale, these domains were intended to represent a person’s capacity to utilize literacy skills in order to accomplish specific tasks in various aspects of their lives (Darcovich 2000; Gomez 2000).

Although the epistemological foundations of the IALS were viewed by some as improvements over earlier attempts to define literacy (Gomez 2000; Roberts 2000), they also came under scrutiny from several related critiques. Some authors noted that the concept of ‘functional literacy’ focuses only on certain aspects of literacy usage and meaning, ignoring the other ways in which people incorporate literacy skills and practices into their lives, and limiting its potential to consider aspects of literacy that are not connected to direct economic or material priorities (Druine and Wildemeersch 2000; Roberts 2000). This conception of literacy effectively overlooks the social and experiential contexts of knowledge. In doing so, it fails to account for national, cultural, regional, and personal variation in encounters with literacy, while simultaneously erasing dynamics of power and oppression faced by ‘illiterate’ populations (Gomez 2000; Hamilton and Barton 2000). This limits the capacity of policy makers to respond to unique local realities, because local development resources and energies are redirected towards the achievement of standards that were developed elsewhere. This is an important point, as it underscores the tendency of surveys such as the IALS to construct
singular standards of achievement which are defined according to specific social and cultural biases. The result is that literacy is defined as set of abstract cognitive skills based on the possession (or lack thereof) of specific information (albeit in varying degrees) that have unitary, comparable goals.

It is important to note that although surveys such as the IALS by no means have a monopoly on the ways in which literacy is framed, assessed, and taught globally, the concept of ‘functional literacy’ it pioneered remains enormously influential in the international sphere. Apart from being championed by the OECD, Hamilton and Barton (2000) have pointed to the similarities in policy objectives between initiatives such as the IALS and those initiated through UNESCO. Other authors have discussed the lasting effects that such approaches have had in the arena of international development in recent years. Along with the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and various other aid organisations, UNESCO has succeeded in tying a functionally defined concept of literacy to economic and social development and the modernization of nations (Bialostok and Whitman 2006). In this way, the theoretic assumptions embodied in earlier assessment tools have come to dominate a much wider range of contemporary development efforts.

The rhetoric of development projects defined in this manner is often rooted in emancipatory slogans such as "Literacy is Freedom", which formed the backbone of UNESCO’s “Decade of Literacy” during the years 2003-2012 (UNESCO, cited in Bialostok and Whitman 2006: 383). Through the range of programs and initiatives sponsored worldwide in that campaign, not only was adult literacy promoted as a gateway to economic development, but the nature of education itself was defined in an individualistic fashion. At the inauguration ceremony to begin UNESCO’s new decade, U.S. first lady Laura Bush stated: “For people throughout the world, literacy is freedom – the freedom to learn independently and continuously throughout life. Literacy gives us the freedom to transform ourselves into who we want to become” (Bush cited in Bialostok and Whitman 2006: 383). The effect of such definitions of literacy objectives is to remove learning from its socio-cultural context, and create literate identities rooted in individual responsibility in relation to uniform standards of achievement. This approach has been referred to as the ‘Literacy Thesis’ (Collins and Blot 2003).
Although some authors have argued that the definition of literacy in this manner is a necessary prerequisite for achieving the goals of development, and its related goals of economic growth (Mazumdar 2005), others have stressed that a focus on independently-oriented literacy also fragments the learning process, both in terms of learning tasks (individual responsibility for learning), and in terms of conceptualizing goals (usages of literacy). In effect, literacy ‘attained’ through programs rooted in such conceptualizations is not only disconnected from community and social context, but is also often used in developing nations to prop up capitalist hegemony (Maruatona and Cervero 2004). Some have suggested that the evaluation of literacy according to narrowly defined standards essentially serves the interests of a global ‘knowledge society’ and flows of global capital (Bialostok and Whitman 2006; Druine and Wildemeersch 2000; Roberts 2000). In this view, literacy development programs and policies may become increasingly tied to existing trends in the exercise of political and economic authority. In a world where literacy is constructed as a set of skills or competencies to be developed, the knowledge ‘required’ to become literate can be commoditised and distributed along with international aid packages and neoliberal restructuring policies. Furthermore, the utilitarian definition of literacy goals and outcomes may serve to draw larger numbers of people into global markets of resources, labour, and consumption. If ‘the purpose’ of literacy is to enable access to specific job-related skill sets or alternative lifestyles, its uses may become increasingly tied to capitalist production and exchange. Regardless of their supposed benefits for economic and social development, such initiatives may construct literacy as synonymous with global capital and labour-related tasks, even at the expense of worker health (Scholtz and Prinsloo 2001; Warriner 2007).

While not all authors are in agreement as to the accuracy or scope of such scenarios, an over-reliance on definitions and evaluations of literacy such as those provided by the IALS, OECD, UNESCO, and others does seem to open the possibility of a widespread trend towards developmental models of literacy education. In this way, new literacy programs and their students may increasingly become tied up with specific modes of production and exchange, as well as with a narrowly defined vision of the uses or purposes of literacy. This is not to claim that engagement with now dominant economic models are an inherently undesirable outcome, but simply that a
standardization of knowledge related to literacy may serve to inhibit the expression of alternative models of learning (and indeed living). However, although this way of conceptualizing literacy is currently heralded by influential international organisations, it is certainly not the only theoretical or practical approach to literacy education.

2.2. Ideological Literacy: New Literacy Studies and Sociocultural Contributions to Theory and Practice

Worldwide, attempts to eradicate illiteracy as well as extensive academic research have inevitably led to the growth of innumerable alternatives to the programs, strategies, and tools espoused by international development agencies. Some of the most notable recent academic contributions have come from authors affiliated with ‘New Literacy Studies’ (NLS), who have built on Paulo Freire’s enormously influential theories of critical pedagogy and praxis as articulated in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1970). One of the most prominent alternative approaches to literacy since the 1970’s, NLS has been influenced heavily by the philosophies of both Paolo Freire and Pierre Bourdieu, and pioneered through the works of Brian V. Street among others. Broadly speaking, NLS stresses an understanding of literacy that is grounded and articulated in terms of specific networks of social meaning in which learning takes place.

Street (1993) refers to what he calls an ‘ideological model of literacy’ – a view that advocates the conceptualization of literacy as a set of social practices that relate to culturally situated modes of resistance and how they intersect with structures of power and authority. In this approach, there is no single ‘literacy’ to which all people can strive, but rather a multitude of ‘literacies’ which are based in variable models of communication. In other words, people are not passive recipients of learning practices, but actively engage with them in unique ways and in doing so form alternative conceptualizations and usages of education. Adult literacy is therefore imbued with social meaning. Furthermore, these meanings cannot be understood without a consideration of how they relate to people’s attempts to navigate, cope with, and confront systemic control (Collins and Blot 2003). Street (1993) contrasts such a perspective against what he labels an ‘autonomous’ model of literacy which envisions
literacy as a set of universal skills to be attained. This model, he argues, has occupied a dominant position in both academic literature and the policy and practice of literacy education. It is precisely this autonomous paradigm that has informed the idea of literacy as a set of functional, individualized skills as enacted through modern literacy and development projects (see 2.1).

Attempts to highlight the ideological character of literacy and address the abovementioned narrowness of current policy definitions has led NLS and other sociocultural theorists to increasingly focus on how literacy is practised in particular social contexts. This approach has gained momentum in a variety of academic circles, particularly in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology of education, and educational and curriculum studies (see Bartlett 2007; Papen 2007; Fischman and McLaren 2005; Freebody et al. 2001; Rutherford and Nyamuda 2000; Brody 1996; King 1994). This has effectively led to an interdisciplinary ethnographic turn in literacy research – indeed the vast majority of recent studies take the position that a qualitative focus on practice is the most effective (if not the only) way of establishing theoretical links between literacy and other aspects of social experience (Lewis et al. 2007; Riehl 2001). However, authors from NLS and other sociocultural schools have also come under mounting criticism for becoming mired in the specific at the expense of the ability to comment on wider trends and systems (Lewis et al. 2007). In other words, what is the purpose of such approaches if they provide nothing more than a descriptive list of the diverse applications of literacy practices? In this sense, one of the largest contemporary challenges to ideological models of literacy research is to assert its relevance to broader sociological theory.

A number of authors have sought to provide analytic purchase through the introduction of a range of conceptual tools to the study of language and literacy. Particularly salient among these approaches are those that emphasize power, agency, and identity (Lewis et al. 2007); the importance of ‘cultural artefacts’ in the production of literate identities (Bartlett 2005); and the relationships between local and global frames of reference (Burgess 2008; Papen 2007). While there is ample room for debate over whether these approaches really do break out of contextual redundancy, they help to highlight why theories that prioritize individual knowledge acquisition might not necessarily reflect how adult literacy practices are actually experienced. However, they also often fall short of advancing concrete tools for the application and assessment of
literacy initiatives on large scales. Indeed, the two broad visions of literacy explored so far (Street’s ‘autonomous’ and ‘ideological’ models) seem very difficult to reconcile.

Interestingly, this theoretical ‘divide’ seems to translate at least partially into the forms adult literacy projects assume in practice. Many authors maintain a distinction between ‘neoliberal’ (or ‘commercial’) and ‘emancipatory’ (or ‘radical’) literacy policies and programs, which are formed on the basis of the seemingly incongruent theoretical assumptions maintained above (Levinson 2005; Gomez 2000; Hamilton and Barton 2000; Roberts 2000). In this view, ‘neoliberal’ literacy practices take the individual as the primary unit of significant analysis, and develop literacy skills in ways that serve economic growth (or, as some would have it, the interests of global capital and labour markets). Conversely, ‘emancipatory’ approaches take systems of power as their primary concern, seeking to harness literacy education as a means to develop agency and challenge social inequalities (many of these programs are in fact based on Freirean pedagogy, though his ideas by no means constitute a monopoly on formulations of emancipatory literacy practices). In the past few decades, these alternative models of literacy education have become increasingly popular in developing regions, particularly in Latin America, which continues to build regional horizontal networks of resource and knowledge exchange (Austin 1999). Amidst the push to erase illiteracy in the region, nations like Mexico have adopted a wide range of both national strategies and state programs to accomplish these goals.

2.3. Adult Literacy in Mexico: Competing visions and problematic uncertainty

Given the spectrum of theoretical approaches to the issue, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is very little consensus on the present situation regarding adult literacy in Mexico. Unavailability of data, discrepancies in measurement, and ontological uncertainty over what exactly it means to ‘be literate’ have resulted in vastly different representations of the problem of literacy throughout the nation. General statistics on literacy tend to vary widely from source to source, and while not exactly hotly contested (in the sense of debates over which data sets are more reliable), they are not consistent either. For example, Tardanico and Rosenberg (2000: 4) claim a total adult illiteracy rate
of 8% for the year 1995, while national educational organizations report a rate of approximately 11% for the same period (INEA 2006: 33). More recently, the results of surveys conducted by state educational organizations also clash with census data collected by the National Institute for Statistics and Geography (INEGI) in the same timeframe and geographic areas (personal communication, February 26, 2009). Other authors go further in challenging the facile categorization of people into ‘literate’ and ‘illiterate’ groups for statistical analysis, arguing that the ‘measurement’ of literacy needs to be addressed in a more nuanced fashion, or abandoned altogether (King 1994).

In spite of these disagreements, statistical articulations of literacy (or generalized references to statistically confirmed conditions) are often used to establish problematic context (i.e. the ‘justification’) for public intervention, even among those who contest the notion of a clear separation between literacy and illiteracy. National census data in particular seem to be the most widely cited sources for literacy rates within and beyond the academic literature. They are also used to inform policy recommendations for the Mexican National Institute for Adult Education (INEA), which coordinates adult literacy programs across the nation (personal communication, August 20, 2009). Therefore, regardless of their ‘accuracy’ or ‘inaccuracy’, the particular representation of adult literacy presented in the census data attains a certain factual quality within academic and organizational contexts.

Statistical rates of illiteracy aside, there is also no clear authorial accord as to how to conceptualize the notion of literacy in Mexico. However, at the risk of oversimplifying, the same broad epistemological and ontological trends cross-cut its representation in the literature. On one hand there is the familiar model of functional literacy that views the capacity to perform specific tasks through reading and writing as the central indicator of a literate individual (see for example Alvarez-Mendiola 2006; McEwan and Marshall 2004; Rangel and Thorpe 2004; Gershberg 1999). While there is considerable variation in this approach (especially in which tasks or criteria to consider in assigning literate status), there are several central commonalities. In this view, literacy is described as a skill set, an individual achievement with a comparative basis in universal (or national, linguistic, etc.) standards of evaluation that are statistically measurable. Alternatively, a number of authors prefer a conception of socio-cultural literacies, which see contexts of learning and application as central considerations (see for example
Kalman 2005; Paciotto 2004; Reinke 2004; Densmore 1998). In this view, literacy is intertwined with social worlds, and is thus learned and applied according to multifaceted models of knowledge and use. For these reasons, literacy cannot be evaluated comparatively (if at all), and authors within this stream usually turn to testimonial or otherwise contextual accounts in their analyses. However, the general congruence between ontological and epistemological approaches is not always the case, as some authors who adopt a socio-cultural understanding of literacy do turn to a variety of techniques for measurement as a reliable source of knowledge (Paciotto 2004), and other functionalist authors rely extensively on testimonial data (Gershberg 1999).

Despite these broad divisions, the consensus seems to be that Mexico faces a ‘problem’ of literacy in a colloquial sense, though its form and implications, as well as how best to approach it, are interpreted differently. The term ‘problem of literacy’ is used here deliberately in order to encompass the wider terms of debate within the literature. Although the obstacle is often represented as one of illiteracy (i.e. a social defect or undesirable trait to be eliminated), other authors argue that it is precisely literacy (its form, content, or language of instruction) that represents a problem (Reinke 2004; King 1994). Regardless of how it is articulated, literacy is overwhelmingly presented as more than simply an intellectual puzzle, but rather a set of conditions with real material consequences. For example, some studies articulate adult literacy as an indicator of socio-economic development between places and populations (Alvarez-Mendiola 2006; Torres and Schugurensky 1994), others highlight the difficulties faced by adult women in accessing educational resources or opportunities (Kalman 2005; Howell 1997), and still others question the consequences of Spanish literacy for indigenous languages and communities (Paciotto 2004; Densmore 1998; King 1994). By extension, adult literacy in Mexico is textually positioned in relation to a variety of other meanings.

It is of interest to note that these conceptual relationships do not map directly onto authorial tendencies towards functional or socio-cultural literacy paradigms. Proponents of functional literacy do not necessarily ignore its implications for gender inequality or indigeneity (Rangel and Thorpe 2004), while advocates of the socio-cultural model do not neglect engagement with theories of development (Kalman 2005). Thus, within the literature, adult literacy is represented in relation to a range of converging and diverging conceptual spheres, ontologies and epistemologies, each with various
overlapping points of reference. In this view, adult literacy education in Mexico is at the
nexus of a conceptual sphere that encompasses at least six different overlapping
frames: literacy; adult education; indigenous education; bilingual-bicultural education;
gender relations; and rural development. Thus, adult literacy is a means to improve the
life of the campesino, a reflection of gender inequality, or a compromising influence on
indigenous traditions – it is simultaneously all and none of these things, and others
besides. The important point here is how various authors have constructed the
connections between these conceptions within their texts, and in so doing, have
produced knowledge about adult literacy.

2.4. Theoretical Orientation:
Centering educators, locating praxis

Despite the diverse range of considerations of adult literacy exemplified by many
of these authors, there are a number of potential inroads for research in this area. At the
most basic level, there is a notable lack of studies that focus on literacy programs
formed from horizontal ties and cooperation between nations in developing regions. The
majority of research has tended to investigate internally constructed national programs
or those linked to international development agencies (likely due to their overwhelming
presence in the international sphere). Thus, although specific programs do figure in a
great deal of the literature, there are an increasing number of collaborative programs
(which may embody very different educational traditions and understandings of the
problem of literacy) which go unresearched. In Mexico, the examination of such
programs may yield a range of educational or other theoretical insights, especially in
light of the move to decentralization and the adoption of multiple pedagogical strategies
(Rangel and Thorpe 2004; Gershberg 1999). Secondly, as noted above, educators
themselves often occupy secondary or contextualizing roles in analyses which almost
invariably foreground policy approaches (Alvarez-Mendiola 2006; Rangel & Thorpe
2006; Gomez 2000; Tattoo 1999; Gershberg 1999; Arnove & Torres 1995; Torres &
Schugurensky 1994; Rippberger 1993), and / or student practices (Hall 2006; Martin and
Guzman 2005; McEwan and Marshall 2004; King 1994). Thirdly (and perhaps most
surprisingly), while there is an almost universal acknowledgement of the links between
theory, policy, and practice in adult literacy education, there is a resounding silence on
how to analyze or otherwise investigate those links. A remarkable number of studies assume points of contact between the spheres without actually locating them. The result is often an analysis in which the transfer of knowledge into action and vice versa is presumed, but rarely explored.

This third silence may be at least partially the result of the second. Research which fails to question centrally the roles of teachers in the educational process will be largely unable to explain how particular understandings of literacy (grounded in specific conceptualizations of ‘the problem’) intersect with policy and practice, and how these contacts might reformulate conceptualizations of adult literacy among various actors. Moreover, it may obscure potential insights into the application of specific literacy programs, or even lessons for wider pedagogical approaches to literacy education. Interestingly, it is this very process to which Freire himself was referring in his model of praxis. However, Freire’s discussions of praxis, aside from being critiqued for internal inconsistencies (Apple 2000), were grounded in a normative conception of political engagement through acknowledgment of students’ realities: “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire 1970: 36). While this vision has been enormously influential in terms of informing critical educational theorists since the 1970’s and developing new ‘radical’ approaches to the education of literacy, the process of praxis itself still is poorly understood in terms of how students’ knowledge and experiences come to be transferred into action or change; and the sites in which these transformations occur.

This study attempts to address at least some of these shortcomings by seeking to explore the role of literacy educators in the process of praxis, and to understand how they actively negotiate intersections between conceptual and practical concerns in their professional activities. By placing educators at the center of investigation, this perspective offers one way of linking the dynamics of student interactions on one hand and institutional policies and structures on the other. The research adopted an approach that positioned ‘praxis’ in a manner that did not take it as a theoretical posture for research, but rather that sought to locate and explore its processes in the field. In this view, functional (autonomous) and socio-cultural (ideological) models of literacy are neither starting points, nor mutually exclusive: they are epistemological options that are encountered and modified through educator praxis. Rather than ‘choose’ between one or
more aspects of the diverse conceptions of literacy (outlined in the literature above) as theoretical givens, this orientation integrates them as potential data, and which allows for other potential conceptions to emerge. Following from this posture and the above considerations, the research was designed to address the central questions: How do educators in Oaxacan adult literacy programs understand the purpose and forms of literacy, and how do these understandings affect the form of their classrooms, educational practices, and interactions with students?

Subordinate to these broad investigative directions, a number of more focused questions helped to structure the research process: What formal training and experience do educators possess? How do they describe their understandings of the program and its objectives? How do they describe their understandings of literacy and its role(s) in the lives of their students and broader communities? What kinds of experiences do educators encounter within the classroom and with the program in general? How have these experiences affected their teaching, lives, or understandings of literacy more broadly? What teaching strategies do educators employ in their classes? What materials and/or teaching resources are available to them, and how do they use them in class? How do they incorporate their experience into classroom activities? How do these considerations affect student experiences and engagement with the program? How are students evaluated, and what effects might this have on student performance and the efficacy of the program? These questions formed central investigative foci for the research, and will aid in the orientation of the discussion below.

It should be clarified that the term ‘educator’ is intended here to describe an administratively defined category within the Oaxacan adult education programs – the ‘facilitator’ (See Appendix – Organizational Map). ‘Facilitator’ refers specifically to literacy workers, while ‘advisor’ is reserved for those who teach successive adult education programs (such as those involving the primary or senior elementary curriculum). While ‘educator’ might be more broadly interpreted as fitting a number of varied job titles, the present research was aimed specifically at the immediate ‘teachers’ of literacy education – those who regularly conducted classes and who had the most frequent face-to-face interactions with students. For the purposes of the following discussion then, the term ‘facilitator’ will be used interchangeably with ‘teacher’ or ‘educator’ (see Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of their roles in the literacy programs). Furthermore, due to a
range of factors (see 4.3), literacy classes were often held in an assortment of spaces and settings. Irrespective of their actual locations, meeting points for the program are hereafter referred to as ‘classrooms’. In order to contextualize these questions and definitions, the discussion will now turn to considerations of methodology and research sites.
Chapter 3.

Research Design

In order to properly appreciate and address the complexity of the Oaxacan educational landscape, it is first necessary to consider the many overlapping administrative, local and personal frames of reference encountered by literacy educators, as well as the institutional threads that tie them together. To establish a backdrop for this discussion, an examination of specific historical and demographic trends in Oaxaca is first introduced, paying particular attention to the various institutions that grapple with literacy education and related fields (3.1). Next, the methodology of the present research is explained, highlighting the use of a variety of methods and data sources, and considering their implications for research participants (3.2). Finally, descriptions are provided of the specific literacy program researched, as well as the research participants themselves and the communities in which they teach (3.3).

3.1. Oaxacan Literacy in Context: Historical trends and overlapping mandates

Despite the many conceptual disagreements reviewed in Chapter 2, there are certain trends in Mexican adult literacy that appear to be almost universally accepted. In general, there are marked divides between northern and southern regions, urban and rural communities, males and females, and native and non-native (or simply non) Spanish speakers, with the former category in each pair displaying higher levels of literacy, more extensive literacy practices, and / or better access to literacy resources (Piper et al. 2006; Kalman 2005; Fuentes and Montes 2004; Clarke 2000).

Oaxaca in particular exemplifies many aspects of these problematic trends. One of the southernmost states in the Mexican Republic, Oaxaca maintains a predominantly
agrarian economy supported by an overwhelmingly rural population (Clarke 2000: 13). Furthermore, it is among the most ethno-linguistically diverse of the Mexican states, being home to sixteen distinct indigenous language groups in addition to a range of colonial and other migrant languages. In many indigenous communities (which comprise a significantly higher portion of the population – 38% – relative to most other Mexican states), Spanish is learned as a second language during primary education and used infrequently in day-to-day interactions (Clarke 2000). Oaxaca is also notable for its high levels of social and economic inequality along ethnic, gender and class lines (Kalman 2005; Tardanico and Rosenberg 2000; Howell 1997; King 1994). In light of the abovementioned trends, it is therefore unsurprising that national census data has consistently placed Oaxaca at or near the bottom of the list for literacy rates over the course of more than a century (Kowalewski and Saindon 1992), while some modern estimates place the overall literacy rate in the state at below 75% (Tardanico and Rosenberg 2000: 43-4).

This situation has of course not gone unnoticed. There are currently a range of organizations involved in various levels of engagement with the ‘problem’ of literacy in Oaxaca. Perhaps the most visible of these are those that plan and administer adult literacy programs and distribute literacy resources. In Mexico, the National Institute for Adult Education (INEA) is officially charged with the coordination of adult literacy initiatives nationwide, along with the more recently formed National Advisory Commission for Education for Life and Work (CONEVyT). The latter of these was the result of a federal proposal to correct gaps in the provision of services to rural and other underprivileged regions. However, the practical effects of this dual institutional approach have created confusion over mandates and jurisdictions, as well as duplications and inconsistencies in literacy services across communities (Alvarez-Mendiola 2006). Less visible, yet nevertheless central to national strategies on literacy are the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) and National Education Workers’ Union (SNTE), which develop general pedagogical directives and materials while providing teacher training and labour for specific programs. These are complemented by federally funded research organizations such as the Centre for Research and Higher Studies (CIEA), which employ academic researchers in various policy capacities (who often simultaneously publish in peer-reviewed scholarly journals). Adding to this overall complexity are
international organizations such as the Centre for Regional Cooperation for Adult Education (CREFAL), UNESCO, OECD, OAS, the World Bank, and other NGOs and aid agencies, each with particular objectives, resources, and sites of intervention.

It is important to note that these organizations are not simply contextual decorations that feature in the literature. In addition to influencing how adult literacy education is practically addressed in Oaxaca, they also play key roles in producing knowledge about adult literacy and related concepts in the form of particular, positioned representations of these issues. In other words, these organizations are simultaneously objects, actors, and authors. Furthermore, although each of these actors is ostensibly engaged with the same broad issues, the lines of affiliation and even awareness between them are arranged in a complex array of diverse relationships. Some authors cite, study, or partner with other actors, while being simultaneously unaware of or unengaged with alternative others. The result is well captured by the metaphor of an organizational web with the ‘problem’ of Oaxacan adult literacy at its centre, the apparent form of which shifts depending upon which strand(s) one stands.

At the nexus of this web lies the Oaxacan State Institute for Adult Education (IEEA), the state branch of INEA responsible for the coordination of government-sponsored adult literacy projects. Charged with the eradication of illiteracy in the state, among a wide range of other educational mandates, their projects span seven regions, 30 districts, and 570 separate municipalities. Directly employing hundreds of educators, administrators, and technical staff, as well as coordinating the efforts of thousands of volunteers, theirs is an organization with enormous scope (and a correspondingly enormous task). It was through the Oaxacan IEEA that the research was initiated and through the many efforts of its staff that it was generously enabled.

3.2. Methodology: Multiple spaces and data sources

Pre-research based on administrative contacts within the IEEA led to the selection of a particular Spanish-language adult literacy program, ‘Yo Sí Puedo’ (literally, ‘Yes, I can!’). Of Cuban origin and design, the program is based on a methodological
design that not only represents a somewhat divergent approach to national adult literacy programs, but which also rarely appear in academic research on literacy. Additionally, the program was applied to a wide and diverse range of communities throughout the state of Oaxaca, while being limited in temporal scope – the project was actually in the process of being phased out when the research was conducted (see 3.3 for a more detailed description of the program). These factors combine to make ‘Yo Sí Puedo’ a unique adult literacy initiative in Oaxaca that nevertheless has made significant impacts on the climate of adult education in the state.

Using a multi-sited case study approach, the program was explored through the lens of eight classrooms that were in various stages of its application. Due to the overall complexity of the program in terms of its organization and execution, potential sites of relevance, and sheer number of participants (students and administrators as well as teachers), a range of data sources were included in the research design. Educators themselves necessarily formed the primary source, though additional consideration of the spaces, people, and materials with which they interact helped to enable a multifaceted treatment of the research questions and broaden the ability to draw links between different aspects of educators' experiences. In particular, the groups of students with whom educators worked came to form a crucial source of contextual and supplementary data. In order to encompass the wide range of both material and personal contacts encountered by educators, the research proceeded in two overlapping phases.

Initially, a period of contextualizing research was undertaken in order to establish organizational maps, administrative networks, program boundaries, and pedagogical and material resources employed in the execution of Yo Sí Puedo and related initiatives. During this phase, multiple informal interviews were conducted with a wide range of IEEA staff from the Institute’s administrative director and regional coordinators, to project planners, promoters, and technical assistants. These interviews covered a wide range of themes from the execution of job roles, organizational frameworks, working relationships and personal opinions, and though much of the contextual information in this paper is owed to them, they were not methodically conducted or analysed and do not form a source of primary data. Supplemental to these discussions, various organizational documents and program materials were collected and scrutinized with a dual objective:
to suggest working thematic parameters for other methods (refining observations and modifying an interview schedule); and to be incorporated into interviews as an elicitation technique (i.e. providing concrete examples for specific questions). For these reasons, the documents that were collected were primarily those with which participants had familiarity, such as classroom resources and organizational communications.

Additionally, administrative documentation relating to the distribution and implementation of classes was reviewed in order to aid in the selection of participants. Potential participants were sought in relation to the location of their classrooms within the dynamic peri-urban periphery of the city of Oaxaca (see 3.3), though exact sites within this distribution were selected randomly (subject to the voluntary limits necessitated from informed consent). This purposive sampling strategy was designed to enable comparative aspects of the data to emerge in analysis, while maintaining a common baseline along which to ground findings. Where possible, selection proceeded independently of administrative involvement, though the somewhat tight-knit nature of the Yo Si Puedo teaching community (as an initiative involving a relatively small number of coordinators – see 3.3) as well as frequent contact between organizational levels meant that the IEEA was well aware of the areas in which research was conducted.

Once specific learning circles (consisting of a single educator / ‘facilitator’ and their active students) were identified, the second phase of research began. Initially, observations of classroom settings (teaching) were conducted in order to provide context, detail, and comparative data, as well as to aid in the finalization of the interview schedule. Specifically, attention was given to teacher pedagogy and practice as exemplified through student-teacher interactions, use of teaching resources and classroom space, and other relevant occurrences and classroom features. Observation at each site took place over the course of several months, and included between ten and twenty hours of observation per site. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the eight teachers who led the learning circles at each site. Questions focused on teacher training, classroom strategies and experiences, and understandings of literacy more broadly. Each interview was approximately sixty minutes in length, following an open-ended format. They were conducted in Spanish and subsequently translated and transcribed to English. The majority of the direct testimonial data in this paper is drawn from these interviews, though general observations as well as student
and staff interactions are also included from all phases of the research process. Secondary interviews were also conducted with some participants, though these were designed primarily as a mechanism for cross-checking analysis and/or debriefing, and did not contribute to primary data generation.

Analysis of the data began immediately upon initiation of data generation, and proceeded as an iterative process, with each method refining and informing the others. This meant simultaneous use of methods and analysis. Primary data was drawn from observations and interviews, which were coded thematically and cross-checked for internal consistency. Although documentation was collected in order to provide context and supplemental material for observation and interviews, they did not form part of the formal analysis, as it is through their application and interpretation by educators themselves that their primary relevance to the research questions was addressed.

Written consent was established with all primary participants, though due to the peripheral engagement of other actors and organizations in the research process, verbal consent was also attained from students in classroom sites, as well as written consent with administrative representatives of the IEEA. The latter procedure was intended to negotiate access to information and establish limits of confidentiality and other obligations between the IEEA and the researcher. That said, it is possible that personal affiliation with the organization in this way may have complicated data generation, as research interests may have been perceived as being aligned with administrative elements of the Institute. This effect may have been exacerbated by the fact that many of the participants were initially contacted through organizational channels. Given the scope, timeframe, and resources of the research, these issues are to some extent unavoidable. However, every effort was made with participants to underscore a clear separation between the researcher and the organization itself. Thus, while sites and participants were indeed identified using organizational information, they were also explicitly informed of the independent nature of the researcher and research process, and reminded of the voluntary nature of participation.

The research procedures used did not expose participants to harms or risks beyond those they encounter in their day to day activities. Still, some of the information generated through the research may have potentially harmful repercussions for
individual participants if it is specifically linked to them. Though not formally employed through the organization (they receive only a small stipend for students who graduate), it is still important to consider the social and financial relationships participants have with the Institute. At the request of two of the participants, some names of people and communities have been replaced with pseudonyms, and some other personal information altered in accordance with individually expressed expectations of confidentiality. However, due to the sometimes close working relationships between regional coordinators, promoters and educators, even disguised information may be socially identifiable in certain circles. Though this is to some extent an unavoidable consequence of the research sites themselves, efforts were made to discuss with participants the potentially revealing quality of their statements, and to give them opportunity to withdraw or censure specific comments or other information. It should also be noted that many of the remaining participants expressed not only a willingness to be personally identified, but also an explicit desire to have their stories told and heard – particularly by the organization responsible for coordinating their teaching programs. For this reason, a channel for feedback was maintained with program planners throughout the research process.

3.3. **Yo Sí Puedo!**

**The program, sites and participants**

The introduction of the Yo Sí Puedo program to the state of Oaxaca began in 2005 as part of a push from the state government to improve educational opportunities throughout the region. The Cuban method was known among IEEA staff for its ease of use, low cost, and swift results. It was administered through the coordination of teacher exchanges, which saw the arrival of Cuban organizers to provide assessment, training, materials support, and various other forms of assistance. Essentially, their role was to
educate IEEA staff and volunteers in the methods of the program, and provide troubleshooting in its application (though in reality they became integrated into many other departments and functions within the Institute). For these purposes, an initial 52 Cuban organizers had arrived in 2005, a number which had increased to 70+ at the time of research\(^1\). They were involved in the training of more than a thousand volunteer educators known as ‘facilitators’, who were in turn responsible for the application of classes on a day-to-day basis. Facilitators were preferably recruited locally in order to reduce travel times and costs (and increase the likelihood of a consistent class schedule), and were required to have completed at least senior elementary studies, though in cases of volunteer shortages exceptions were sometimes made to either criteria.

The classes themselves, also known as ‘literacy circles’ or ‘teaching circles’, could consist of anywhere from two or three students to 30 or higher. Facilitators were supported in these efforts not only through training (from Cuban organizers and supplementary IEEA staff), but also through the provision of materials through ‘technical assistants’; the location and recruitment of new students through ‘promoters’; and administrative direction through regional ‘coordinators’ (see Appendix A). Pedagogically, Yo Sí Puedo was intended as a basic ‘starter’ program for persons that had little to no previous experience with reading or writing. Functionally, it was being used by the IEEA to form a bridge between these people and the national literacy curriculum (known as ‘La

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\(^1\) The precise number fluctuated throughout the research, as individual organizers’ terms of service expired and others began, or as some members came and went from periods of vacation.
‘La Palabra’ – or ‘The Word’\textsuperscript{2}; though in practice the two were sometimes applied in tandem.

Methodologically, classes consisted of one hour sessions divided evenly between a video segment (or ‘videoclass’) in which a lesson was demonstrated, followed by a period for the practice and application of the lesson through individual workbooks and group interactions. Videoclasses showed footage of ‘simulated classrooms’ in which exercises were completed by students and teachers (played by actors), and featured a variety of scripted questions and banter – such as a student on screen lamenting her financial hardships and imagining a life without them; and an accompanying assurance from the teacher that it was not too late: “Yes, you can!”\textsuperscript{3}. The subsequent exercise period was essentially a replication of the lesson presented in the videoclass, with attention to the needs of individual students and further queries.

In total, the Yo Sí Puedo program consisted of 64 classes, though this number was routinely modified to accommodate a variety of changing circumstances (see Chapter 4; 5.3). Early lessons consisted of how to properly hold a pencil; while subsequent lessons involved the recognition and reproduction of individual letters (coupled with oratory practice), later moving to complete words and sentences. Initially,

\textsuperscript{2} Several facilitators and other IEEA staff referenced difficulties in the application of La Palabra with students who had no prior experience with reading or writing. Apparently, the ‘starting lessons’ were proving exceedingly demanding relative to the capacities of some new students. This in turn was posing challenges for the retention of students in the basic literacy program.

\textsuperscript{3} Each ‘student’ in a videoclass was intended to represent a recognizable archetype with which actual students could relate – such as a farmer who had dropped out of school at a young age to help support his family; an older woman from an indigenous community who had never attended formal educational programs; or a young mother who through various circumstances had never fully developed her capacity to read and write. The content of these videos had been specifically tailored for a ‘Mexican audience’ through collaboration between Cuban coordinators and staff from INEA, and resulted in the development of a unique version of videoclasses for application within the Mexican national territory. It should be noted that these modifications were made at a national level, and as such were not specifically tailored for the use of the program in any particular state, region, or sociocultural context.
letters were paired with numbers (e.g. A-1; E-2; P-11) for ease of recognition and recollection, which students would then identify or place into larger sentences (for instance, ‘Eggs are a good food’; ‘It is necessary to take out the trash’; ‘In this market, they sell in kilograms’; or ‘To read is to grow’). These lessons culminated in a final exam that consisted of a series of activities such as ‘fill in the blanks’; ‘listen and write’; or ‘write a sentence about…’, which were similar to those performed in class.

The political goal of the arrangement with the Cuban government was to achieve rapid, widespread reductions in rates of illiteracy in the state, and to induct as many new students into the national literacy curriculum or primary education programs as possible. The result was a short-term project (a five year contract) that nevertheless attained broad geographic reach – each of the IEEA's 22 administrative districts boasted at least several dozen classes using Yo Sí Puedo, with many reaching several hundred. This meant that of the 432,000 Oaxacans classified at that time by the IEEA as ‘illiterate’, a significant percentage of them were involved in literacy circles informed by the program. In the region in which the research was conducted, approximately 6,000 students were enrolled of an estimated 12,000 ‘illiterates’. Of these, 79% were over the age of 65, and over 80% were women.

The literacy circles that participated in the research were spread across three separate communities surrounding the capital city of Oaxaca. All are located within peri-urban regions in the central valley system of the state, acting as outliers to the capital centre. As such, they all share a number of key characteristics. Most notable is the partial and often inconsistent implementation of state subsidized infrastructure, especially electricity, running water, and paved roads. It was not uncommon to see one

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4 Like the videoclasses, the exam used in Oaxacan literacy circles had been modified from the original program. Where the final examination had initially consisted of a letter crafted to a significant other or local politician, the modified (Mexican) version relied instead on this series of exercises. This was apparently in order to facilitate the transition of students from the Cuban method into the national literacy curriculum (‘La Palabra’).
neighbourhood integrated into these networks, only for their reach to end abruptly a block away. As one student put it: “The houses, they go on. The [power] lines? They stay right here”. The result is an often patchy sense of urbanization that alternatively radiates from local municipal centres or connections to regional highways, interspersed with farm plots and areas of bare *campo*. Similarly, transportation to the capital is consistently accessible from these focal points, while municipal routes are serviced inconsistently or sometimes through improvised local means.

Another prominent characteristic of these peri-urban communities lies in their demographic makeup. Although specific ratios vary greatly from district to district, these areas are home to widely diverse populations formed from a mixture of established local families, more recent immigrants from the surrounding mountainous regions, and city-dwellers seeking escape from the noise and crush of the urbanized capital. This situation also carries with it a certain degree of linguistic diversity, particularly in the form of indigenous languages from rural migrants, or infrequently a foreign language learned though urban schooling or experience as migrant labourers. Instances of multilingualism aside, Spanish is widely understood and spoken as both the official and dominant language. Indeed, for the majority of peri-urban residents in Oaxaca it is their sole one. The result of these patterns sometimes translates into striking disparities in the municipal landscape. Often vast differences in access to wealth or other resources can lead to the juxtaposition of widely contrasting personal homes and businesses, even within neighbourhoods that lack collective access to infrastructure and services.

In spite of some of these similarities, the three communities which hosted the research are distinctive in many ways. The first, Tapalopan, is at its core an historical town known for the production and sale of various crafts and other artisanal goods. Over the past few decades, the original community has grown while simultaneously becoming increasingly integrated in the expanding urban footprint of the capital. Today, it maintains its heritage economy through continued local production, though the sale of these goods is becoming increasingly tied to exchange in urban markets. At the same time, the changing geo-urban landscape has diversified the labour force, overseeing an increase in urban commuting, small-scale farming (somewhat limited by unsuitable soil conditions), and professional services. However, despite its growth, most local access to
goods and services continue to be concentrated in the traditional town centre, with outlying areas often only accessible by foot and separated by broken, hilly terrain.

Of the facilitators that participated in the research, three of them were teaching in the community of Tapalopan. At the time of investigation, Fernanda was 24 years old, and had completed senior elementary schooling. She was originally raised in a neighbouring community, but now lived in the state capital and commuted to her classes, as well as to visit family members who had moved to Tapalopan. She had been teaching with the program for three years, but also taught primary and senior elementary classes provided through other IEEA courses. Jorge was 16 and had completed his primary education, though he was planning to finish his senior elementary studies the following year, and was presently enrolled in computation courses. He was raised in Tapalopan, having recently moved with his family to an adjoining neighbourhood to the one in which he taught, and was a new facilitator with the program, engaged with his first ever group of students. Valeria was 35 and had completed her secondary education, graduating with a focus in accounting (which she joked about never having used). She too grew up in Tapalopan, her family having long, ‘politically active’ roots in the community, and had been teaching as a facilitator for almost 16 years (with a variety of literacy initiatives).

In contrast to Tapalopan, Santa Lucía was, and continues to be, a diffuse municipality reliant on medium-scale agriculture. Though the community has grown steadily over the decades through both natural increase and immigration (even to the point of spilling over into neighbouring municipal administrations), the majority of residents continue to work the surrounding fertile fields – either for themselves, or in the employ of landowners who have managed to consolidate larger and larger plots over the years or even generations. Those not directly involved with agricultural production often work at or run smaller support businesses. These tend to be spread throughout neighbourhoods and provide fairly consistent access to a handful of goods and services – particularly mechanical support for the increasing reliance on mechanized agriculture. At its intersection with the regional highway, the community boasts a relatively new municipal centre which serves as a focal point for the organization and distribution of government services such as health and education. However, the sprawling nature of the municipality means that it remains far removed for many residents. Furthermore, local transportation – while available – is not always affordable for some.
Two participant facilitators were conducting literacy circles in Santa Lucía. Nayeli was 37 years old, and had completed her senior elementary schooling. She had come to the community more than 20 years previously when she had married her husband, and had been teaching for 15 years in various capacities with the Institute (IEEA), primarily as a literacy facilitator. She had also worked as a promoter for several years, but more recently went back to teaching classes. Ximena was 42, and had recently finished her senior elementary education through another program offered by the IEEA. She had been living in an outlying part of Santa Lucía for more than 25 years and worked as an auxiliary nurse in the municipal health center, while also spending the previous two and a half years as a facilitator with the program.

Perhaps the most dissimilar of the three communities is Sierra Vista, which did not formally exist until fairly recently. Essentially growing piecemeal out of the urban sprawl of the capital, it nevertheless occupies administrative territory belonging to a regional centre farther out in the valley system. Though it is the closest of the three communities to resembling a ‘suburb’ of the city of Oaxaca, its unique geography has still somewhat separated it from a contiguous integration with the push of urbanization from the capital. That said, it largely rose from the need to house increasing numbers of both regional migrants and a growing urban population, and was constructed quickly and in alternating spurts of growth across multiple small previously existing population hubs. The result is a community criss-crossed with quaint residential neighbourhoods, small plots of farmland, minor commercial and industrial complexes, open fields, squatter settlements, and roads in every direction. Access to services of all kinds is equally haphazard, though the provision of multiple decentralized municipal hubs increases the feasibility of accessing government resources (while simultaneously hampering coordination in their provision).

Sierra Vista was home to the classes of three participant facilitators. Amalia was 49 year old, having completed her primary and senior elementary studies after she had come to live in the community with her mother at the age of seven. She had migrated from a mountainous region in the northern part of the state and lived in her present neighbourhood since that time. Her last three years had been spent as a facilitator with the program. Ana was 52, and had moved from the capital to Sierra Vista with her family three years prior in order to pursue employment opportunities. She possessed a
Bachelor degree in education, having worked for the previous 20 years as primary school teacher, and just under a single year with the literacy program. Lizeth was 28, born, raised, and residing in the capital. She had completed a university education in administration, and had spent the last two years working in the planning department of the central state offices of the IEEA. At the time of research, she had been facilitating classes for six months, commuting to various communities (including Sierra Vista) on administrative request in order to fill gaps and staffing shortages in the program.

The classrooms occupied by the participating literacy circles were no less diverse than the backgrounds of their facilitators and the communities in which they were conducted. Officially, accommodations had been made for the use of office space at local municipal centers, where program materials (such as audiovisual equipment and spare workbooks) were stored along with the temporary offices of technical assistants for the district. Such spaces were often shared with other municipal and state programs and projects, and as such came in a wide variety of sizes, amounts of clutter, and states of repair, though they were generally adequate for the immediate needs of most classes. However, for a variety of reasons, many groups ultimately met in other spaces, most frequently the residences of students or the facilitators themselves (see 4.3). These realities meant that the settings inhabited by literacy circles were subject to inconsistent and often varying conditions.

It is clear from the complexities of peri-urban Oaxacan communities, the variety of classroom facilities and facilitator backgrounds, the unique arrangement of the program itself, as well as the overarching institutional and demographic makeup of the state, that the application of Yo Sí Puedo is an enormous task. In order to further explore these complexities, the challenges of the program, and what this might mean for facilitators’ understandings of literacy, the discussion now turns to the presentation of a key set of research findings which underscore the practical, material, and conceptual relationships between literacy and development.
Chapter 4.

Literacy, Development and Material Needs

As can be seen from the preceding discussion, the application of Yo Sí Puedo can come to represent a daunting challenge for both the program administrators and its facilitators. This chapter introduces research findings by establishing site specific discussions of adult literacy education in the context of development paradigms and administrative priorities. First, it presents an examination of statistical measures of student success employed by the program, and how their use can impact the possibilities for continuing education, as well as the financial realities of facilitators (4.1). Next, the discussion turns to a conceptual alignment between literacy and development encountered in classrooms and discussions with facilitators (4.2); before moving to a consideration of infrastructural and economic barriers to literacy education (4.3), and the material constraints of the program (4.4). Finally, it is argued that the juxtaposition of functional associations of literacy and its uses, with the realities of infrastructure and service access in peri-urban communities, can create a strong conceptual alignment between literacy and development (4.5).
4.1. Literacy in Numbers: Statistical indicators of capacity

One of the greatest challenges of the Yo Sí Puedo program remains as to how to evaluate its overall efficacy and create measurable, sustained gains in adult literacy. After the first three years of teaching with the program, several interim localized literacy censuses were performed by the Cuban contingent and other members of the IEEA. The results were somewhat inconclusive, though they suggested that in many areas, close to 45\% of students demonstrated retention rates that would allow them to pass into the more advanced primary education programs offered by the IEEA. A further 20\% displayed mixed results or incomplete knowledge bases, and would possibly benefit from continued participation in literacy circles. The remaining 35\% had shown little to no capacity to successfully complete the evaluative components of the program (exercises and a final exam), though the reasons for this were varied and often beyond the control of individual facilitators (poor attendance and Spanish language difficulties were often cited by IEEA staff).

These figures (while somewhat variable by region and not assembled systematically) in actuality represented an enormous accomplishment for the program, which was subsequently extended for a further two years. While many IEEA staff recognized the inherent imprecision of a simple checkbox for ‘literate’, ‘in progress’, or ‘illiterate’, the necessity to assemble large amounts of comparative data and convey results to higher levels of the organization or government meant that these internal reporting methods were relied upon extensively. By extension, the numbers themselves came to represent a factual measure of success for participants of the program.

To clarify, these figures are based on widely cited verbal approximations of the precise figures, which were not obtained and verified. Regardless of the exact statistical estimates, the important point here is how they informed widely disseminated social knowledge about literacy and the efficacy of methods.
Significantly, it also reaffirmed the value of the teaching circles and secured future financial and material resources for their continuation. In this way, numerical indicators of success became fundamentally integrated with the program’s objectives in ways that were not necessarily envisioned in its pedagogical design.

These statistical measures of success did not come without their difficulties, however. The conceptual mission itself of eradicating illiteracy and the subsequent administrative need to ‘declare’ students literate could lead to gaps between student capacity and service provision. In some cases, students who had successfully completed the program objectives and then lapsed before enrolling in primary education courses (or those who had simply never continued with their studies after ‘becoming literate’) were among those who ‘failed’ in subsequent re-assessments. Simply put, they forgot. One student who had recently rejoined her group noted: “How can you expect me to write now? I haven’t seen those things [Yo Sí Puedo workbooks] in so long”. While many retained the ability to produce commonly repeated activities (such as a signature), much of their capacity needed to be relearned.

This situation was particularly problematic in light of administrative limits on the distribution of classroom resources and financial incentives. Once a student had been declared literate, there was no further available budgetary support until they enrolled in the primary education curriculum. This created a substantial educational vacuum – an administrative limbo of sorts – into which a significant number of new graduates from the program fall. Where possible, these students (those who were so inclined) were readmitted unofficially into new circles, though the facilitator for that group would forego any claims to financial remuneration for their re-education (as it had already been paid and collected by another). In some cases, entire circles were formed unofficially from re-admitted students, with the facilitator acting in an entirely voluntary capacity, even spending personal resources on the acquisition of classroom materials. In fact, the
circles taught by Ana and Ximena at the time of the research were formed from such conditions. During one of the interviews, Ximena described this situation:

I\textsuperscript{6}: So [your classes] are completely voluntary?
R\textsuperscript{7}: Yes, what happened is that they told me that these people already wrote their exams, and that they shouldn’t be in the Yo Sí Puedo and La Palabra module. So right now, there’s no pay.
I: But before, there was?
R: Who knows really, [name of other facilitator, not a research participant]. She said that she received payment for each exam. But since she’s already claimed it, I can’t have the economic support, because that would be like repaying for the work already claimed by her.
I: For the same students?
R: Yes, the same students...Because when I went back to work with them, they didn’t know how to read at all, not even how to write their name. So they told us that they needed some volunteers to teach those that didn’t learn.

In cases such as these, students who continue to struggle with literacy are nevertheless recorded officially as ‘literate’, as they have previously completed the course requirements and passed the final exam. It is through these measures that the administrative definitions of literacy and success become tied to specific course objectives, even as they form the basis of future financial support for the program. For students that may later require additional assistance, their readmission to a literacy circle can be conditional upon an ‘off the books’ volunteer strategy used to fill the gap between official statistical measures and the realities of students’ capacities. Although in Ximena’s case, she was able to supplement her teaching activities through her job as a nurse, not all facilitators are necessarily in a position to do so.

\textsuperscript{6} Interviewer.
\textsuperscript{7} Respondent
4.2. Literacy as Development: A portal to economic growth and personal success

Aside from the creation of direct statistical metrics for the success of the program, its goals and outcomes have come to be understood by the participants of literacy circles in a range of other ways. Dominant among these conceptualizations of literacy is its impact on and potential for other forms of development. Indeed, literacy was often spoken of among both facilitators and students as a prerequisite condition for the advancement of other internationally recognized indicators of development. Chief among these was its importance for access to employment and other direct economic benefits to the communities. In discussions with facilitators, one of the most commonly cited reasons for or benefits of adult literacy programs was their ability to provide skill sets to students that are transferable to their working lives. As Jorge noted:

R: Well [literacy] affects [the community] because it doesn’t develop, it doesn’t progress because people aren’t learned, that’s what strikes me

I: So you’re talking about development how?

R: Economic development. I think that if everyone were more studied, there would be more professionals. In my opinion the town would be richer. It would be more progressed, more than anything. There would be more educated people, they would know places better, there wouldn’t be so many poor people, they would have something. With education you can do anything right? It’s the baseline. Without education you don’t have anything, without education, there’s no work.

I: So do you think that many students come and study literacy in order to work?

R: Well, I think that because they are already adults, not so much. I think that they come, well, because here they sell crafts, right? For example, someone brings them a note that says ‘I want three pots for Monday’, but the artisan doesn’t know how to read. They’re just going to stand there staring at them, they’re never going to bring the pots.

This conversation exemplifies one manner in which literacy was discussed by facilitators almost universally. Of particular significance are not only the way in which literacy specifically (and education more broadly) are conceptually linked to the existence, quantity and forms of individual work, but also the roles of literacy in the economic development and ‘progress’ of the community as a whole. The first
observation is perhaps unsurprising, as advanced and former students (who often revisited their classes after completing official program requirements) often spoke in class of the impacts the programs had had on their working lives. For example, one group of students used their newfound literacy skills to secure a vending space at a market in the state capital, while another (self-employed as a weaver) emphasized her increased capacity to use large numbers in her dealings with customers and distributors. One student even told her class that just knowing how to read basic letters gave her the confidence to find employment outside of her home (and indeed leave it at all by herself) – she had been previously worried about her inability to read street signs and did not want to become lost. That facilitators consistently described literacy in relation to employment opportunities and economic success is only natural – it is one of the stories constantly encountered by educators in their classrooms.

Direct economic benefits are not the only ways in which literacy is conceptually tied to the processes of development among facilitators. In other cases, their stories relate the benefits of literacy for other indicators of development. For example, Amalia raised the observation that reading comprehension can lead students to make differently informed choices in their lives:

R: I was speaking yesterday with [a student], we were talking about a book they sent out, this one right here [a text on family planning], and she said ‘wow, this book is opening my eyes…if I had learned this before, my daughters wouldn’t have failed’, because she has two failed daughters, ‘It’s a shame I didn’t learn from a young age, but now older, I’m learning. Here it says everything’, she said, ‘how you should get your child’s attention, what is good, what is bad, how to educate your child’.

I: What do you mean when you said she had two failed daughters?

R: Well, she couldn’t speak to them in time, so one of her daughters had a child at 15. In other words, she didn’t know how to tell her child in time what...

I: About those topics

R: Yes. All about sexuality, all of that, she couldn’t talk to her, she didn’t know how to say anything about it. She just let the girl do what she was going to do.

I: And now with this book...

R: Now with what she’s reading, it’s opening her eyes
This discussion raises the idea that more than just providing a means to acquiring or improving direct financial support, literacy serves as a gateway for other forms of knowledge. As can be seen in the above example, the ability or inability to engage with this knowledge can have far reaching consequences for lives beyond that of the individual learner. Students who are ‘locked out’ of access to particular streams of information (such as public health releases, political dispatches, and other forms of text-based correspondence) may also struggle with other areas of their personal lives and community involvement. The overall effect of such trends in a community can lead to a noticeable influence on other indicators of development. It is perhaps for these reasons that a corresponding association is also commonly invoked between illiteracy and poor living conditions. While this was most often expressed simply in the form of economic poverty (“To be illiterate is to have nothing for yourself, nothing for your family” – Lizeth), a variety of other scenarios were also suggested such as causes for illness and the inability to equitably resolve contractual disputes involving property or other resources.

It should also be noted that several students openly challenged the idea that their inability to read necessarily translated into economic disaster or personal and familial difficulties. One student laughed at the suggestion from her facilitator Ximena, quipping “My metate doesn’t ask me if I can write”. In another class a student, frustrated with a neighbourhood mapping exercise Nayeli had improvised, used the opportunity to add some levity to the group: “Why would I need one of these things, anyway? I’ll just get in a mototaxi and tell them to take me to my house!” In still another session, a student objected to the very same materials Amalia had explained were eye-opening for another group member: “Information about child care? We already know how to take care of our children here”. These sorts of objections suggest that in spite of the presence of an overarching narrative linking literacy and development, students may sometimes reject the value of specific knowledge gained or enabled through literacy programs in favour of local knowledge.

However, even when students rebuffed the utility of lessons for their personal lives, quick thinking on the part of a facilitator could sometimes reassert their functional value. In one class, a group of Ximena’s students were disparaging a lesson from a previous literacy circle, in which a technical assistant had attempted to introduce them to a new exercise from the national literacy curriculum, ‘La Palabra’. In the exercise, they
had been working with a recipe for mole⁸, a subject matter to which they did not take kindly: “Don’t waste our time! We already know how to make better mole than that”. Looking back from her present lesson, in which they were identifying words from a sentence about a market, Ximena retorted: “Is your mole that delicious? Well then maybe you should sell it at the market! Better pay attention here now!” It was in ways such as these and those described above that the idea of literacy and its delivery through the program were positioned as enablers of material and developmental progress. These themes were a continually repeated feature across the classrooms and in interviews with facilitators.

As noted in Chapter 2, these relationships between literacy and development have long been underscored in a variety of academic and institutional publications. Indeed, the conventional logic espoused by proponents of functional literacy and the Literacy Thesis is that universal basic literacy is a fundamental prerequisite for the economic development of communities and nations. There is nothing particularly new in these observations – they have been forming the basis of international development efforts and public rhetoric for decades. It was therefore unsurprising to encounter constant references to these relationships in the field. These perceptions may also have been more directly reinforced through constant and repeated use of program materials and ‘scripted scenarios’ in videoclasses that highlighted the material and other developmental benefits of literacy education (see 3.3). Interestingly however, these sorts of accounts (whether ‘success stories’ or cautionary tales) were usually offered by facilitators as direct explanations for both the purposes of the program as a whole, as well as the uses of specific classroom activities and materials. This conceptual alignment

⁸ A generic term for a range of sauces traditional to Southern Mexico, for which Oaxaca is particularly famous. The assumption here is that the provision of ‘culturally relevant’ course materials will spur student interest and aid retention rates. This was a significant departure in strategy from the more generalized Yo Sí Puedo approach, and the merits of each were often vigorously debated amongst IEEA staff and Cuban coordinators.
of program objectives and development paradigms is significant, and will be returned to in Chapter 6.

4.3. Developmental Barriers: Infrastructural and economic considerations

While literacy was often positioned as a necessary prerequisite for other forms of development, it is also at the mercy of the scarce or partial implementation of existing development projects and the hard realities of alternate economic priorities. In basic educational programs like Yo Sí Puedo, which is methodologically dependent on frequency of use, this can have enormously complicating effects on students’ abilities to meet course objectives. One facilitator, Valeria, described some of these challenges thusly:

R: Sometimes you have to bring materials to [the students], or go inform them when the next exam will be, remind them. It’s not always in class, sometimes part of the job is in the countryside, you have to walk a long way

I: So you’re talking about going to find the students if they aren’t coming to class?

R: Yes, like that. When they don’t come, well in my case I go to visit them. Why didn’t they come, why not? Sometimes they are still making progress in the class, sometimes not. But if there’s an exam, they have to write it.

I: So what do they say to you in those cases? Do they explain why they haven’t come?

R: Well, there are situations in which, I have a few cases here in which they’re going to sponsor a santo [local religious festival] next month, and they’re preparing for the expense...sometimes it can be complicated for them. In this case, imagine how you have to come to class but still prepare. We have to [study] another day. Sometimes, there are other problems...for example, like right now when it rains, a stream grows over there, and it prevents them from getting across because there’s no bridge.

Valeria went on to explain some of the challenges these situations can cause for students’ progression in the course. In short-term, relatively intensive programs of study such as introductory adult literacy, just a few weeks absence can necessitate a complete review of previous lessons or even set a student back to the beginning of the course of
study. In the case of inadequate transportation infrastructure, such as a bridge over an arroyo, there’s very little to be done – the simple fact of geography means that certain students have inconsistent access to study circles at different points in the year. Add to this the realities of varying personal commitments, and it becomes difficult to ignore the fact that over time, some groups become increasingly fragmented in both their familiarity with course materials and ability to successfully complete exercises. The resulting frustration of students who find themselves falling behind can lead to further absences or cause them to withdraw completely from the program. Fernanda noted that this was an ever-present complication within her groups: “Always there’s a few you have to be very patient with, you can’t go too fast or they’ll just leave. They won’t come back. And then what? Back to their houses another time!”

In other cases, the wider economic activities of the community can derail entire sections of a class or effectively disband a learning circle for a period of time. In Santa Lucía, planting and harvesting seasons take immediate priority over even the promise of future economic stability through literacy (see 4.2). During this period, students who work in the agricultural sector (predominantly men) rarely have the energy at the end of the day to attend classes (though there are some dedicated individuals who will show up even on an empty stomach). Even for motivated students, the lack of daylight on their arrival often meant increased difficulty in seeing in all but the best lighting conditions. Depending on the demographics of the group and timing, these conditions may necessitate a temporary hiatus and even complete re-initiation of the course. At the time of research, Ximena’s male-only group had just reconvened after just such a break. Even in the temporary absence of such difficulties, she recalled other complications with her attempts to apply the program:

I: So you teach over there, in the houses of two of your students?
R: Yes, for their own comfort, because transport from their homes to here [municipal offices] would cost them 20 pesos each. So that’s why we do the classes there, so that they’re motivated to continue with the program, because they didn’t want to keep coming all the way here.
I: So that’s the reason you don’t use the videoclasses?
R: Right, it’s too difficult. We can’t bring [the audiovisual equipment] there, because again, the transportation costs. And also, because we’re outside, what do we do if it starts to rain?
I: Do you have a place to connect them, over there?

R: Yes, I think in [one student]’s house, all the way in the back, in his room there. But that’s not where we do the classes, so we can’t. And over at [another student]’s house, there’s no place at all.

In this case, a combination of uneven access to power grids and a lack of subsidized municipal transport led to the removal of a central feature of the Yo Sí Puedo methodology. Interestingly, this problem had been anticipated by program planners for rural and mountainous regions. In communities more distant to major urban centres, coordinated teams often travel with the necessary audiovisual equipment and portable generators. In peri-urban communities however, power solutions are routed through municipal centres with consistent connections. This leaves educational infrastructure tethered to specific points of contact. In cases like Ximena’s, this necessitates either a lack of geographic flexibility which may negatively impact student attendance, or a reduction in available teaching resources which may hamper a facilitator’s ability to effectively lead classes (particularly if they are new or inexperienced). The potential consequences of the former choice have already been discussed above. The latter option, while potentially retaining a greater number of students and maintaining a more even distribution of course progress, can also result in significant deviation from course curriculum. From a program application standpoint, it’s truly a no-win situation. For those people living in intermittently developed communities then, access to basic literacy education can be even more problematic in some ways than in so called ‘undeveloped’ regions, at least for those who have yet to reap the rewards of infrastructure projects.

Even groups that met regularly in municipal centres had no guarantee of regular access to their benefits. Jorge’s classroom was located in a (normally locked) municipal facility, the keys for which were in the possession of the local authorities:

I: So have you ever had any experiences where you were missing something?

R: Yes. Sometimes when, for example yesterday the [municipal] police weren’t here, right? So we couldn’t open the classroom. I had to try to give the class just with their notebooks, write the letters in their notebooks. We didn’t have a single resource, we didn’t have a chalkboard, no DVD, no television, markers, nothing. So I had to do the best with what I had, not what I planned
Although the classroom itself may have represented an equally disagreeable option\(^9\), these circumstances posed a serious dilemma for the class: wait for the facilities containing their course materials to become available (and lose time or students to alternative commitments); try to reschedule (accommodating as many students as possible); or simply ‘do the best with what they have’. In this particular case, the class voted to set up outdoors in the municipal plaza and continue the lesson there, though Jorge later confessed “we spent most of the time just talking about other things”. Thus, the conditional access resulting from reliance on municipal infrastructure external to the program (even though it is this very infrastructure that enables full access to the program’s course of study) can cause inconsistencies for the learning experiences of students and the lesson plans of facilitators. Especially for newer educators, this can prove to be a daunting experience.

4.4. **Material Scarcity:**

**Gaps in provision and recognition**

As if unreliable infrastructure and conflicting economic priorities weren’t enough, facilitators also often contend with shortages in materials for their classes. Although the technical assistants (see Appendix) try their best to keep groups supplied with the basic necessities like pencils, workbooks, and chalk, the sheer scale of the project itself and the sometimes erratic tempo of meetings described above can make that effort a very difficult proposition. This difficulty, combined with semi-frequent staffing shortages and

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\(^9\) The designated ‘classroom’ was a dusty, narrow, cluttered room attached to a frequently used municipal gymnasium, which was labelled ‘nursing’ and featured what appeared to be a dilapidated dentist’s chair towards the back.
the correspondingly larger territories for other technical assistants to cover, mean that some learning circles inevitably face scarcity of even basic supplies. ‘Permanent’ classroom supplies, such as chalkboards, flashcards and audiovisual equipment, fared little better. Though these resources were often readily available at centralized sites for service provision (such as municipal offices), learning circles that met away from these hubs were often lucky to score a simple whiteboard and markers. Fernanda, frustrated with such a situation, turned to improvisation: “The T.V.? No, they didn’t give me one. I had to take it from my brother, the cassette player too. It caused problems [with him], but in the end we solved it”.

In addition to core program supplies, supplementary materials were often difficult to obtain. For example, while program planners (in light of demographic data for enrolled students) had anticipated the need to provide assistance for students with complications in visual perception, the lack of dedicated, trained medical staff attached to the program meant that diagnosis and correction was a constant problem. Although all were well into their courses of study, three of the participant groups were still waiting on requested eyeglasses and another two had only just received bulk batches of varying prescriptions as a stop-gap measure. Many classes also featured other supplemental resources that were not officially part of the program materials, yet nevertheless utilized by intrepid facilitators (such as laminate information sheets, figurines, Bristol board and even crafting supplies). These could only be acquired through the expenditure of the facilitator’s personal resources, or by pooling money from the group. Given the modest financial compensation for their work, this often meant a significant sacrifice on the part of facilitators, who nevertheless continued to incorporate their roles as educators into their daily lives and expenditures. As Nayeli commented,

R: I always relate my job to everything. Because sometimes I have to go to the store, but I also use the opportunity to inform everyone [of class dates, news, etc.]. So there I go with my little one, pushing him along, but I stop at all their houses along the way. I’ll stop over that way, and come back all the way over there, even in the heat, because what they [the IEEA] give us, it’s not even enough for an umbrella

These sorts of issues are problematic enough for officially tracked literacy circles. ‘Unofficial groups’, such as those for returning or repeat students (see 4.1), suffer from
correspondingly unofficial resource budgets. Though essentials such as workbooks and limited writing materials are usually obtainable through ‘clandestine’ requests via the correct channels, facilitators themselves sometimes need to assume a larger burden of materials support. A friendship with a technical assistant, program coordinator, or even other facilitator with materials to spare can often work wonders in these situations, as can drawing on other interpersonal networks. Ximena mitigated additional costs by folding purchases for her students in with school supplies for her children and then pooling with neighbours for bulk discounts at the beginning of the school year. Ana on the other hand collected discarded and surplus materials from her job as an elementary school teacher, bringing them home for use in her literacy classes. However, solutions such as these may not always be an option for individual facilitators, for whom the access of additional classroom supplies often continues to represent an additional financial burden.

The recognition of such difficulties in materials acquisition underlines a simple truth facing adult literacy classes in these communities: even in instances of organizational material abundance, overstretched distribution networks and administrative tendencies towards statistical tracking can lead to a lack of educational resources on the ground. When combined with the observations in the preceding sections, it becomes immediately apparent that while literacy may be conceptually tied to ideas of development and economic success, the literacy programs which serve as its vehicles are highly dependent on other development projects and economic inputs.

I use the word ‘clandestine’ here as a perhaps tongue-in-cheek quote from a Cuban organizer. In reality, these ‘unofficial’ groups are no secret at the IEEA, who make continual efforts to support them with any disposable means. However, the ‘off-the-books’ nature of these circles create very real financial limits on the forms and extent of support that can be made available.
4.5. **Cyclical Development:**

**Co-dependent conditions for literacy education**

What emerges is a picture of development that is mutually implicated with the formulation and application of literacy programs. The effects of these relationships are not always as simple as ‘enabling development’, or ‘creating barriers’. They are often caught up in cyclical associations in which both the projects of and ideas relating to literacy and development are closely tied. In some cases, the two conceptions became understood as analogous or even synonymous with each other, associations which have been reinforced through previous political (now-discarded) additions to the application of literacy programs. Fernanda spoke of some of the difficulties this raised in the community in which she works:

**R:** Well, before when it was a different municipal authority, they gave *despensas* [basic groceries and foodstuffs] to the students every month. And well, like everything else some would only come for the groceries, and then didn’t come to class. So when it was time to give out the groceries, they would fight amongst each other. They’d say ‘hey, no, why are they giving it to them if they didn’t even show up, they missed a lot’. And so once I had to deal with an argument between two people, two women. Over groceries, nothing more. So I talked to them and said ‘look, you’re putting me between a rock and a hard place, because the groceries are for everyone’. And the other person hadn’t come for over a month, but when the groceries came, so did she.

**I:** So it was creating a lot of problems. Did they work it out in the end?

**R:** No, they left still saying things. But I said listen we have to respect the place in which we were, because there were other people around...they were punishing everyone. So at the end of it, one of them stopped coming and everything calmed down. Yes, so afterwards when the municipal president’s term was up we cancelled the groceries, and there were several people who left the group because there were no more.

This effect may have been exacerbated by other NGO-led literacy programs in the region, at least one of which had established a precedent of distributing kitchen appliances and other household items in exchange for participation in Bible studies. Ximena noted that since the application of such a program in a neighbouring municipality, she had experienced difficulties in recruiting new students, some of whom demanded similar compensation for participation. Apart from creating a source of
potential conflict among students, these sorts of policies serve to equate the ideas of literacy and economic support more closely than simply the former as a long-term road to the latter. While some students may still regard the link essentially as a ‘means to an end’ proposition, the attachment of material rewards or other forms of service provision to literacy programs helps to strengthen the association between literacy and other politically or organizationally administered development projects.

These associations are often more than just conceptual. In peri-urban communities, the slow creep of urbanization and integration of state-sponsored and other services often brings students into contact with a variety of bureaucratic institutions for the first time. Where an effectively rural homestead would before rely on a well or rain-filled cistern and candles or petroleum lamps, its integration into an increasingly urbanized landscape often means interacting with documents such as electricity and water bills. This is often accompanied by a range of other printed materials from urban signage to local fliers and government information pamphlets. One student noted: “Before I didn’t care so much. There wasn’t anything around here. Now, there’s just so much to read!” Thus for many residents of these communities, the need to develop particular literacy skills comes hand-in-hand with the arrival of other symbols of growth and progress. In this way, the ideas of literacy and development become increasingly intertwined.

Furthermore, gains in literate capacities (from participation in literacy programs) are not only reinforced through increased engagement with written urban artefacts, they can also provide positive feedback loops which serve to accelerate further engagements. For example, Lizeth related that the husband of one of her students had recently passed away. This had forced her to regularly tackle the monthly bills and other mail coming into the household – tasks that had previously been undertaken by her husband. After sharing this new state of affairs with the group, some of the other students decided to take up the challenge as well as a show of support for their classmate. As a result of their increased familiarity with literacy tasks and confidence in their own abilities, some of the women lobbied their husbands (successfully, in several cases) for increased involvement in managing written household correspondence with utilities, their children’s teachers, and other services and contacts. Nor were these
changes limited strictly to literate activities. Nayeli commented on the transformative power of literacy for public speech:

R: I hope that at least everyone who’s working with me, and who trusted me to reach their goals, can finish studying, because if they can’t, they won’t even be able to voice their opinions in an assembly. Like when there are meetings here in the community, they’re scared to give an opinion, because they think that people will laugh at them, so they don’t speak. It’s no good. At least, I’ve seen it, because they speak and give their opinion, and there are others over there that are laughing at them, at their comments.

I: So literacy helps them in speaking and listening in a public forum as well?

R: Yes. And it makes for better participation. I’ve seen it, they get up and give their opinion, and there are those other [members of the community] that laugh, but there are others who listen.

In this instance, increased confidence as a result of participation in literacy circles and the acquisition of knowledge served to enable political participation through public speaking. This may also lead to at least partial dissipation of the ‘shame of illiteracy’ commonly discussed among both facilitators and students, though – as can be seen above – not always without issue.

Whatever the case, these gains in public participation have also resulted in returns for the students in the sphere of development. Valeria recounted how a group of her students had the previous year petitioned the local government for a public transportation solution – and won a bus route extension into their neighbourhood. In ways such as these, literacy and development can become mutually implicated forces which shape wide-ranging aspects of the lives of students, facilitators, and the communities in which they live. It is easy to imagine an opposing scenario in which a lack of electricity in a local classroom hampers the learning process or continued participation in the program, which in turn may leave students unwilling or unable to appeal for the very electricity that is needed. These are the sorts of realities faced on a daily basis by residents of peri-urban communities. Both as conceptual ideas and material consequences then, literacy and development are neither causes nor consequences of the other, but interlocked stepping stones in the process of urbanization.
The results presented in this chapter help to highlight the relationships between urbanization, development and literacy, as well as their implications for institutional aims, resource allocation, and facilitators' understandings of uses and goals of literacy education. This could be characterized as an analysis of literacy classrooms as they relate to economic and/or material concerns, or alternatively as they relate to the larger institutions and processes through which they are structured. In the next chapter, the discussion moves to an exploration of the social and experiential realms of literacy as shaped through facilitator and student participation in the Yo Sí Puedo program.
Chapter 5.

Social and Experiential Literacy

Another key thematic field indicated through research findings lay in the social contexts of adult literacy education in Oaxaca. Facilitators and students alike often pointed to the ways in which their experiences, classroom practices, and conceptions of literacy were shaped through their participation in literacy circles, which came to represent significant sites of social contact. To explain these observations, this chapter begins with an exploration of the ways in which facilitators came to teach with the program, highlighting the importance of personal histories and social networks in their routes of induction (5.1). Similarly, the pathways taken by students, materials and ideas between literacy circles and the wider communities in which they occur underscore the importance of broader social networks and interpersonal relationships to the form and activities of literacy classes (5.2). Finally, the discussion considers how new social networks forged through participation in literacy circles are important for both the experiences of students and facilitators, and the production of new literacy communities; arguing that the creation of unique social spaces within literacy circles may provide a lens through which actors reformulate or broaden definitions and understandings of the forms and uses of literacy (5.3).

5.1. Facilitator Involvement: Personal histories and social networks

While literacy was often described by facilitators in relation to its developmental and material roles, the reasons cited by facilitators for their initiation into and continued participation in adult literacy programs such as Yo Sí Puedo were highly varied. In some instances, facilitators were directly recruited into the program through IEEA activities. Both Amalia and Valeria were invited to join by promoters who were in the process of
conducting local literacy assessment censuses. In Amalia’s case, the promoter (also a local resident) had already come to know her through the organization of a community festival, and actually sought her out personally in hopes that she would volunteer. Nayeli on the other hand, was invited by a friend to attend the inauguration ceremony for the newly constructed municipal centre. Initially, she had been interested in hairdressing lessons that were among the various services on offer, but eventually ended up being drawn into a conversation with an IEEA coordinator after her friend hung back to chat up a romantic interest.

Other facilitators learned of the program by extension of pre-existing activities and commitments in their daily lives. Jorge became curious about the literacy circles that met in the municipal centre where he took computing classes (after they were repeatedly interrupted by raucous laughter from the literacy group). Similarly, Fernanda would often end up wandering the community plaza while waiting for her younger brothers to finish school. These forays eventually led her to a friendship with one of the technical assistants working with the IEEA, whose frequent comical anecdotes about her job convinced Fernanda that she wanted to take part in the program. On the other hand, Ximena’s job as an auxiliary nurse led the doctor she worked with to recommend her to a literacy promoter he had known since secondary school.

In some cases, the paths leading facilitators to their work with adult literacy programs moved beyond mere serendipity. Although Ana was also introduced to the existence of the program through her employment (a teaching colleague), she actively sought out a position with the institute in order to satisfy her passion for teaching. As she explained, this passion grew from a series of experiences much earlier in life:

R: I like to teach. I like that others know what I know. I like that they don’t stay stuck behind. At the least, that’s why I wanted to do this. Before, when I was a young girl I remember when I just finished secondary school and my mom said, ‘you’re going to the teacher’s college over there’. And me. ‘No, I don’t even like that’. Seriously, I didn’t like it, not at all. Be a teacher? ‘Eww!’ Like that.

I: Like that? Why?

R: You want to know why? Those were the ideas of a little girl. All that about going to study and teach, no! I was thinking of boys.

I: What did you want to do then?
R: Anything else! But afterwards, when I enrolled in the university, it just so happened that I failed a few subjects. And [my parents] took me out and said ‘you’re not going to study anymore, you’re not going to do anything, just stay here in the house’, and all of that...I didn’t know what to do with myself at home. My mom would say ‘[the food] is burnt, or it’s cold, or too hot, and if you don’t do it, we’re not going to eat. And you’re going to do everything. You’re going to wash, you’re going to iron’. Ay, no. They didn’t buy me clothes, they didn’t buy me shoes, I was punished! But really punished! And then I had a few neighbours who moved in, they were studying in the teacher’s college. They said to me, ‘don’t you want to be a teacher? Look, there’s the school, right over there. Go ahead!’. So okay, over there I saw an escape, a door. That wasn’t a full time school, just part time. You had to work to keep studying, so I started covering for sick teachers, and I became more interested in it. And from there, I didn’t do it so much for the pay, I started to like teaching...And like that, I studied four years, but working, until they gave me my own placement. But by then I liked being a teacher, and my mom said, ‘didn’t you say no? Weren’t you saying eww, and who knows what? If you had studied from the beginning, what time you wasted, you would have already retired!’ ‘Sure’, I said, ‘reproach me’. But when you’re young, you don’t even think.

Ana’s experience grants some insight into the often complex personal histories and social positioning that can lead both facilitators and students to pursue their goals of learning. Her desire to escape from traditional gender roles and their imposition of a life of domestic labour was both necessitated and facilitated by other actors in her social sphere (in this case her mother, and neighbours, respectively). This eventually led her to a position from which she could not only emancipate herself, but also aid the efforts of others to follow a similar path. These can be powerful motivating factors in the decision to join literacy programs. Lizeth recounted how, as a teenager, her mother would always ask her for help with learning to read and write. When her mother passed away without having ever achieved her goal, the experience had a profound impact on the way she viewed her own personal responsibility for the education of others. Although she initially worked in the IEEA in an administrative capacity, a chance visit to a rural community led Lizeth to a conversation with a woman who reminded her deeply of her mother. From that moment forward, she resolved to become directly involved in the application of the program as a facilitator.

Stories such as these help to highlight the crucial role social networks and personal histories can play in integration pathways to programs such as Yo Sí Puedo.
Similarly, the new networks and interpersonal relationships formed through participation can serve as a powerful motivation to continue. Ximena explained how her group provided a positive sense of place in the face of a difficult domestic situation:

I: Out of curiosity, why do you keep doing [the program] on a voluntary basis?
R: For me it serves as a distraction. It helps me personally, because maybe I have many problems, and so there are moments in which I can’t be at home. In my free moments when I finish my chores, or when I leave the clinic where I work, to come home is to be bitter the whole afternoon. So I look for a place to go comfortably, and invest the time into something healthy. If I were a little girl, I’d probably go to the playground, I don’t know [laughing]. But at my age, there’s nothing for me. So I have a lot of fun teaching people. It’s very helpful for me.

In this way, literacy circles can provide a means to seek and establish new (and sometimes more desirable) sources of contact. In doing so, a facilitator may build a welcoming sense of place, a socially meaningful role for themselves, or simply transform a potentially undesirable afternoon into a positive experience. In some cases, these benefits may help to maintain their participation in literacy programs long after they decided to begin. After 15 years in a variety of positions in adult literacy initiatives, Nayeli explained how she had recently struggled with a desire to walk away from it all:

R: When you’re calculating the amount of time you think they need to learn to read and write, and if they don’t learn, I feel discouraged. Because I feel that I’m not teaching them well, or I get frustrated and don’t want to keep going. I say, ‘well, it’s better that I don’t go on, because I can’t teach, better let it lie right there’.

I: What motivated you to keep going after feeling so frustrated?
R: What happened was that I left them for a week. They didn’t come and I didn’t tell them anything, because I felt bad, I didn’t want to do it anymore. But afterwards, I said it’s better if I tell them ‘yes’, because I was used to them coming again and again, and when they didn’t come, I felt really alone. It didn’t feel good to be at home anymore. ‘I’d better keep going’, I told myself, so I went and told them all to come back. So I guess I just didn’t want to feel alone.

In this case, the experience of teaching had itself become so integral to her day-to-day life, that the idea of giving up its benefits became a difficult choice. It might be
said that the social networks and sense of community she received from participating in literacy circles had come to form a part of Nayeli’s personal history.

Processes of integration such as these might also lead to unexpected yet nevertheless elating transformations in a facilitator’s social roles beyond the confines of the literacy circles themselves. Several research participants commented that since they had commenced with the program, other (non-student) members in their communities had become friendlier with them, or began to greet them as ‘teacher’ when they passed them in the streets. For Ana, this had helped to significantly change her sense of belonging in her new neighbourhood. When she had moved there with her husband several years prior, she had experienced serious difficulties in relating to or even being able to speak with many members of her community, a situation she attributed to religious differences between herself and her neighbours (the local majority were Evangelical Protestants)\(^\text{11}\). Since she had begun to work in literacy circles however, she noted that relations with at least some of her neighbours had warmed considerably, a situation which had greatly improved her day-to-day happiness. Thus, the sense of connection or place facilitators find within their teaching groups can be reaffirmed and reinforced through extended social networks that reach far beyond the classroom.

For facilitators then, personal histories and social networks played critical roles in shaping their continued involvement with adult literacy programs. Although the situations leading to participation were sometimes somewhat providential, in other cases they were formed from concerted efforts forged through past personal experiences. But regardless of the motivations that led to those decisions, they were all enabled through varied social pathways. Furthermore, the experience itself often came to represent an entirely new set of meanings for individual facilitators, be it an escape from a difficult home life, a sense

\(^{11}\) It should be emphasized that these are Ana’s suppositions placed into the vacuum of information left by her unsuccessful attempts at communication. The actual ‘source’ of the rift is unimportant to the present discussion, rather the effects of its eventual dissipation.
of conviviality, or a social lubricant with members of the wider community. For facilitators, this means their acquaintance and continued engagement with the program takes on a range of diverse, yet highly personal meanings that nevertheless often engendered a highly self-fulfilling experience.

5.2. Integration Pathways:
Routes for participation and ideas

Social networks can not only have significant effects on facilitators’ experiences, they also form integration pathways through which students and methods (and even sometimes materials – see 4.4) are drawn into literacy circles. The ways in which students are invited into – or come to seek out – literacy classes are often just as varied as the paths taken by facilitators. In an organization with a mandate as large as the IEEA (and a corresponding interest in achieving a wide geographic and demographic scope) it is only natural to rely on census style door-to-door identification and recruitment (see 4.1). These efforts are occasionally punctuated by organized community events at municipal centres, which are attended by representatives from a wide range of organizations and services, including promoters from the IEEA. At one such event, a promoter was handing out cake, which had been decorated with the program slogan, ‘Yo Sí Puedo!’ She took the opportunity to point this out to a group of potential students: “Look, what a beautiful cake! Wouldn’t you like to know what is says?”, to which one of the women retorted, “Why? It tastes good either way!” The promoter later commented that moments of levity such as this, even when (jokingly) dismissive in content, help to draw more and more people into participation with program. Although such approaches
remain official\textsuperscript{12} and primary methods for the location of new students, facilitators often supplement these efforts with a range of other strategies.

In many cases, facilitators often located new students on their own initiative through pre-existing social networks. Often, networks established through work or other day-to-day responsibilities became important tools in this respect. Ximena used her job as an auxiliary nurse to constantly talk up the program and invite new members into her groups. Fernanda on the other hand relied on her younger brothers to convince family members of their schoolmates to ‘go see the teacher’. In some cases, social links formed through years or even generations of living in a community became powerful forces for attracting new group members. As Valeria explained:

R: Well, I’m well known. We’re from Tapalopan, and we take part in other activities. We go to the schools, political and social events. My neighbours know me, they knew my family before. Even others from the town here, even if I go downtown they know me. Sometimes there are periods when the buses break down, but since we all know each other, we all go together [in someone’s vehicle]. We’re a community.

I: So did you know your students before they came to participate?

R: Some of them, yes. Others are sent to us by [the promoter]. But many are acquaintances. You remember [name of student], right? She didn’t want to come, but I remembered that my father knew her father, from a long time ago. So I told her ‘how do you think our fathers would feel about this’, and she looked embarrassed. But in the end, she came! ... Another woman told me, ‘we come, because we trust you’.

\textsuperscript{12} This is not to say that this is the only administrative response to the need to locate and convince new potential students. The mantra in the offices remains ‘by whatever means necessary’, though a systematic effort which results in a wide cast of the net serves as an effective tool for maximizing recruitment opportunities.
In ways such as these, the use of and appeal to pre-existing relationships and social obligations can be surprisingly effective means through which to engage reticent potential students.

So too can the use of wider extended social networks in which facilitators may not be directly integrated. In some cases, this might be simply the fortuitous by-product of regular conversation between members of the community. Jorge commented that through word of mouth alone, his group had almost tripled in size since he began classes. In other cases, the fragmented demographics of peri-urbanism can actually serve to channel recruitment through minority networks of communication. Amalia emphasized how she had enlisted several of her students to serve as ‘little-promoters’ among their social contacts with other recent migrants from the mountains. This also served to circumvent hesitancy caused by linguistic differences, as the students were able to ‘pitch’ the program to their peers in their first language. In Ana’s circumstances (recall from 5.1), such networks proved invaluable in ensuring a continued influx of students into her classes. Several of her graduates had offered to serve as a point of contact within their religious communities (sometimes recruiting before and after religious ceremonies), citing their positive experience both with the program and Ana herself. That the IEEA and Yo Sí Puedo programs aspire to recruit local facilitators and promoters wherever possible demonstrate that they are well aware of the benefits of such arrangements.

While community-driven recruitment such as this is undeniably valuable in bolstering participation in adult literacy programs, these pre-existing patterns of social contacts and expectations could also have unexpected ramifications for the forms of literacy circles themselves. Ximena explained how tensions among some community members led to a schism in her group:

I: And so you have one group for the men, and one group for the women
R: Yes
I: Can you explain to me again why that is?
R: What happened was that the husbands of the women, well in spite of their age, still feel jealous. So the women told me that it was more comfortable for them to form a group for just the women, and have a group for the men. And so now we have two
new women, one just handed in her [identification] papers, and now we’ve seen a little advancement

I: So you separated the two groups to avoid problems with the students’ husbands?

R: Yes, so that if the husbands showed up to look for their wives, they would see that it was a family thing, in the house of their family. And the same with the men, they all meet at a family residence.

In this case, the value systems of both students and other community members, as well as their understandings of social place and propriety led to a reformulation of the class structure and removal to a more agreeable location. Whether due to jealousy, suspicion of government motives and projects (another possibility raised by several research participants), or other motives, these interactions can lead to literacy circles widely different from those imagined by program coordinators. Of those classes which participated in the research, only two actually met in their designated municipal centres (equipped with the ‘full spectrum’ of classroom materials). As discussed in chapter 4, these circumstances may also arise from developmental barriers or other material or economic considerations. Though it may or may not be significant, the two classes that met in their municipally designated spaces were those led by the two newest facilitators to the program. Whatever the individual reasons, it is readily apparent that community networks and sites of social contact can not only swell the ranks of the program, but also have a significant impact on the ultimate forms and even locations of classrooms.

Nor are these social integration pathways limited solely to attracting new members and shaping literacy circles, they can also serve to define the dynamics of the classes themselves. One of the most common features of the groups that participated in the research was that their methods weren’t particularly common. Over and above the regular curriculum and recommended activities (or sometimes in lieu of it), facilitators employed a wide variety of alternative teaching strategies not encountered anywhere in the official course materials. As Fernanda explained, these methods can reach the groups through many of the same social channels that help serve to populate them:

R: For example, we’d start with a word, and we’d take just one letter. And so we’d put it on a flashcard, because we don’t have a blackboard here, they never gave us one. And then you take the cards and write ‘mom’, or ‘dad’, or something with the letters.
And sometimes, I’d cut the form out of other [materials] and put them out, and then blindfold the students. Then they’d have to form the word with the letters in from of them. It’s not so easy to forget that way.

I: So how did you come to use that technique in your classes? Was it your idea? Something from training?

R: No, it’s because I noticed that that’s what they were doing with my little nephew, and he understands it faster. He told me ‘hey look they gave me cut outs of the letter A for homework’, and so he goes right away to look for [materials], he concentrates a lot on the job. So I said, ‘okay, I’m going to use this on the adults’.

I: Where do you get the materials, do they give them to you, the cut-outs, or do you...

R: Sometimes there’s recycled books that [the municipal offices] don’t need anymore. I just go and get them from [a municipal worker] over there. And the scissors? Those are from home, but don’t go telling my brothers, okay? [laughing] And that’s what we use.

In Fernanda’s case, not only did she extrapolate teaching experience from a family member’s involvement with another sort of literacy class (primary education), she then adapted the technique to suit her needs and the material realities of her group. Drawing from a contact in another social network (as well as a measure of personal ingenuity), she managed to acquire the resources she needed to supplement the flashcards and activities provided by the institute. In fact, facilitators regularly resorted to a variety of extracurricular methods, the ideas for which flowed from a range of social interactions not necessarily related to the literacy program itself. Whether adapted from the performance of other roles (Ana regularly called on her professional teaching experience), or borrowed from interactions in the wider community (Amalia’s ‘newspaper murals’ modelled after those she found in a local historical celebration), these alternative methods served to colour each literacy circle in unique and often creative ways. Valeria went so far as to have her students use their skills in weaving to form letters – the results of which they then experimented with to try to form then familiar words. These alternative activities sometimes completely supplanted the normal lesson plan, though the decision to do so was not always solidly in the hands of the teacher. As Nayeli explained:

I: So those activities that you use when [the students] get bored, how did you decide to use those? Did the institute...
R: No, us. Within our group, we give our opinions. And I let them give their opinions. 'Do you want that, or not?' or 'tell me what you want to do'. Or who wants to and who doesn’t, why don’t we do this? Those that want to play, over here, those that don’t over there. It’s like, the vote rules, because if the majority wants to do something, we do it. How would it be possible otherwise?

In many ways then, individual literacy groups forge their own experiences. Though lesson plans weren’t always put to election, they were often modified or even reshaped through ideas pulled in from other points of contact. These integration pathways were often the same ones that helped to draw in new students or shape classroom demographics, sometimes extending beyond the immediate sphere of the facilitator themselves. They often proved particularly effective in cases where facilitators or promoters faced cultural, linguistic or religious barriers to communication with some members of the community. Due to the numerous directions from which people, ideas, and materials flow into literacy circles, the program itself is expressed in a myriad of locally produced variations.

5.3. Group Solidarity: 
Literacy circles and community production

Though literacy classes might find themselves at the hub of wide social nets that reach far into the communities in which they reside, they may also be integral to the development of new forms of community. The internal group dynamics of literacy circles often came to create strong bonds between members. While individual friendships certainly grew and flourished outside and long after classes, the classes themselves seemed to hold a draw for many students. As Lizeth commented:

R: Well, there are a lot of students who have finished the literacy program, but don’t want to continue
I: They don’t want to move on to [primary education]?
R: Yes. I tell them they should go, but they come and they tell me ‘and then how will we come to see you teacher? What will we do with ourselves? How will we have any fun?’ And of course, it makes me feel good, but they have to go. They need to go!
I: So do they go on?
R: Some of them, yes. Some of them, when they finish, that’s it. It’s enough for them. For them to say ‘yes, I know how to read and write’. And at their age...

I: So do you still see them afterwards? In the community?
R: Well, some of them, they come back to the class after a little while.
I: They come back here?
R: Yes
I: Do you ever ask them why?
R: When they show up again, they always say the same, ‘I want to keep going, because I got frustrated at home. I got used to coming’.

While a certain reluctance to relinquish the often jovial memories of class seems only natural, there are some important considerations raised here. First, it seems that the acquisition of literacy skills (the ability to ‘read and write’) represents a goal in and of itself for some students. Instead of forging ahead with their education, students may be satisfied with the capacities they have acquired through their participation in the program. Interestingly, several facilitators talked of the prideful or even boastful ways in which some of their former students described their newfound literacy, suggesting that for some at least, the social identifier of ‘literate’ was also an important goal in the completion of the program in addition to its oft-cited economic benefits (this idea will be returned to in greater detail in Chapter 6). Secondly, of those that had attained this distinction (even among those that held no immediate plans of pursuing further educational studies), some would return to their literacy circles in spite of having already ‘graduated’. Given the flexibility of the program (and individual facilitators) in readmitting lapsed or repeating students (see 4.1), ‘los de vuelta’ (or ‘returnees’) as Valeria called them were usually easily accommodated.

The reasons for the return of such students are at least partially captured in the above dialogue – quite simply literacy circles can come to represent an escape from domestic affairs, or an activity to look forward to. However, it is clear that for some participants of literacy circles, the classes themselves encapsulated more than that. As Amalia explained:

R: Illiterates? They’re very persecuted. There are some that cry and cry. I don’t know if you saw the last time you came, there was a
woman, she’s about 70-something years old, she cries. I tell her ‘don’t cry, there’s still time, if you want, come by daily and you can move your life forward. With [the program] you’re going to learn to read, you’re going to learn to know more things. This is a door opener, nothing more, but beyond that, there’s so much’. The people that I have are special cases, and I feel responsible for them, so I feel the same that they feel. It’s like living their story.

I: So their...

R: All of it, everything affects them. There are a lot of things that they don’t know, many things like that, sometimes they want to get it out, right? But it’s just now that some of them are opening up. It helps them a lot, it’s like psychology

While part of Amalia’s appeal to her student was still hedged in a developmental paradigm of progress (see 4.2), she also raises an interesting consideration: that the circles which provide literacy education may also form a base for emotional support and human contact. Indeed, several of the groups included students who regularly came early or left late from classes in order to discuss a wide range of personal problems not directly related to literacy. Sometimes these were private meetings between a student and the facilitator, but often they involved other members of the group who arrived as the conversations progressed, or who stayed late to offer their advice. These sorts of interactions may provide at least part of the continual allure of literacy circles even after their ‘functional utility’ has expired.

Regardless of the individual motivations of students, many groups did in fact develop these sorts of extended social exchanges, the effects of which sometimes transcended the boundaries of the classrooms themselves. At one of Ana’s meetings, a student arrived distressed about a domestic conflict she had experienced just before class. By unanimous vote, the class itself was suspended and the group spent the remainder of the hour discussing the situation and providing encouragement. When she arrived the following week, the class members demanded an update, and were satisfied to begin the lesson only when they were assured the troubles had subsided. In another instance, some of Ximena’s class members went to the residence of a fellow student whose spouse had attempted to prevent them from continuing with the group – demanding that the student be allowed to participate. In cases such as these, it becomes apparent that literacy circles provide benefits to their participants well beyond
the immediate tools of reading and writing. In this way, they can come to constitute internal support networks that can be focused to address a variety of wider issues in students’ (and even facilitators’) lives. These issues are not necessarily limited to troubleshooting, however. Fernanda noted:

R: It’s happened to me many times that [the students] start to care about me, I pass from being their teacher to being their friend. They even tell me their problems, like in their homes. You start to win their trust
I: So you get the gossip
R: Oh no, when it comes to that, then we don’t even study anymore, we gossip! No, no first the classes and then the gossip

Some circles thus came to serve as hubs for the transmission and exchange of a wide variety of information about the communities in which they were held. Invitations to family gatherings, small-talk about mutual acquaintances, discussions on changes in the neighbourhood, who-said-what at last week’s dance, and a wide variety of other topics were frequently discussed before, after, and often during lessons. In some cases, classes even served as points of exchange for physical goods (‘little markets’, as Lizeth called them) and even gifting between students, facilitators, and other visitors to the group. Against the backdrop of wider flows of goods and information within and between local communities, literacy circles might be seen as small communities in and of themselves. In this light, it is no small wonder that some students continually found their way back to the teaching circles, even after they had completed the official course curriculum. However, as Amalia explained, the willingness to return to classes wasn’t always volunteered:

R: Well sometimes if [a student] doesn’t come, we have to have a meeting about what’s going on. Why don’t they come anymore, or why don’t they want to come? We have to have meetings to talk with them. Those that come daily, or frequently, well, ok. But with others, ‘why do I have to come to your house, if the study centre is over there? Why do I have to come and see you here?’ And the ones that come daily get angry. ‘Why don’t the others come? Who do they think they are that they make you go to see them at home?’
I: So the other students get involved
R: Yes, against the others, about why they don’t come. And that’s the only way, it shames them a little into start to come again.
It is in ways such as this that the importance of membership in a literacy circle is emphasized. Not only can the social dynamics of the group provide personal support and alternative networks for the exchange of social information, they may also be mobilized to encourage or otherwise convince reluctant students to continue with the program. Drawing on appeals to these relationships and the responsibilities they represent can create powerful obligations to honour commitments to the program and its members through the use of shame. So too can this group solidarity be used to exert collective pressure on members outside of the circle (a reluctant spouse, for example) in order to enforce collective will. For their participants then, literacy classes often come to represent much more than a means to a strictly defined ‘literacy’ (whether as capacities in reading and writing or as a social identifier). The groups that form within the communities in which they are held can come to embody communities all their own.

It was particularly in the presence of or in reference to these communities and the relationships formed within them that facilitators would sometimes come to describe a vision of literacy that diverged from its standard developmental associations (see Chapter 4). Recalling a pair of former students who had formed close friendships with her during their participation in the program, Nayeli offered the following description of the value of literacy:

R: Literacy means that you have to teach the people that don’t know how to read and write, right? And to not be selfish, I think. Because sometimes when someone learns, they don’t want other people to know, those that can’t. That’s how I imagine it.”

I: It’s to share the information that you have?

R: Right, with those around you.

Even though this explanation of literacy is still ultimately hedged in terms of literate capacities (i.e. the ability to read and write), it offers the suggestion that these capacities can become bound up with social obligations for knowledge sharing. Literacy, even while consisting of discrete skill sets, is a ‘community resource’ to be shared freely with members of the literacy circle (and by extension, the surrounding communities from which participants are recruited). However, this sentiment can also come to transcend the specific knowledge sets associated with literacy. Shortly after one of her ‘therapy sessions’ with a student, Amalia began to describe her role as a facilitator as “a
responsibility to help others without your own interests”. In this case, she was referring to the emotional support and personal advice she was sharing with her student, albeit through her position as a literacy educator. Moreover, such interactions are not necessarily limited to the transmission of information from facilitator to student. As Valeria commented after a particularly lively class: “Maybe, some days I learn more from them than they do from me”. It is even possible that such exchanges of knowledge may have more wide-reaching effects beyond individual participants and immediate literacy communities. For example, Ximena had noted a decrease in intra-communal violence in her neighbourhood since the introduction of the program, an association she attributed to the power of literacy to broaden interpersonal communication and understanding.\(^{13}\)

These sorts of descriptions suggest that for some facilitators at least, the social bonds formed through participation in the program can lead to a rethinking of their roles as educators, and to a broader understanding of value and uses of literacy education within specific communities. It is interesting to note that during the course of research, these sorts of explanations tended to be favoured by more experienced facilitators, and more often evoked in relation to specific social ties or activities. While they perhaps do not always break free completely from a developmental paradigm (in that the ‘knowledge’ of literacy is still a commodity to be distributed – freely or not), they do show that the sites of literacy education are not solely limited to the sharing of literate capacities, but may also come to create points of multidirectional exchange for other forms of knowledge, assistance and support. In these ways, the communities formed through participation in literacy circles can come to represent significant sites of social contact through which facilitators’ perceptions of literacy are reshaped.

\(^{13}\) While this correlation is entirely speculative and beyond the scope of the present research to investigate, the important point here is that Ximena believed this to be the case. In this sense, the association becomes a socially meaningful fact, irrespective of its factual veracity.
The unique and highly contextual character of each literacy community helps to underscore the diversity of experiences that can come to inform new practices and understandings of literacy among facilitators. These observations also help to highlight a thematic separation between the ways in which literacy education is experienced and understood materially (see Chapter 4), and the ways in which it is encountered in relation to local communities. Essentially, the formation of literacy communities is contingent upon the varied ways in which both students and facilitators integrate, respond to and recreate local relationships; and has subsequent implications for locally produced variations of literacy programs. In other words, literacy communities can represent alternative sources of knowledge and practice to those provided by institutionally created standards, concepts, and curricula. Furthermore, the application of such knowledge and practice by facilitators may be negotiated through the very communities that helped to produce or introduce them; though they can also be subject to material, financial, or infrastructural constraints imposed through institutional frameworks and peri-urban landscapes.
Chapter 6.

Discussion and Conclusions

At this point in the discussion, it will be useful to reflect upon the thematic and conceptual frameworks established in previous chapters, before drawing further conclusions from their findings. Central to these conclusions is the idea that participants in literacy programs experience literacy education through both developmental and communal (or material and social) paradigms; each of which play important roles in conceptual formations of literacy, and contribute to their ‘real’ experiences with literacy (and illiteracy). However, these paradigms are encountered at different and identifiable sites or points of contact, which may help to differentially shape classroom activities and understandings of literacy for both students and facilitators.

The chapter begins by examining the sites of intersection between literacy practices and paradigms; arguing that the constant interplay between these frames of reference may serve to expand and diversify the methodological and conceptual ideas of facilitators, while simultaneously reasserting an institutionally provided definition of literacy (6.1). Next, the consequences of this narrowly defined literacy for students and the program itself are considered. Findings suggest that while an institutionally crafted title of literacy can lead to disparities between statistical measures of success and the skill sets of students; such titles can nevertheless possess significant social value (6.2). Finally, the discussion concludes with a number of reflections on the implications of the research for literacy education in both policy and theory (6.3).
6.1. Institutionally Guided Frameworks, Community Guided Practice

Despite individual variation in the social dynamics of literacy circles, as well as in specific access to urban infrastructure and material resources, the observations from the preceding chapters persisted across all classrooms. In general, the overarching objectives of the program itself were frequently and universally discussed in terms of its relationships to the processes of development – be it in terms of personally attainable economic solutions or wider community development projects. These associations were invoked irrespective of both the level of urban integration of the communities and neighbourhoods in which classes were held, and of the level of access of material support they enjoyed. On the other hand, the structure, methods, form, and even location of classrooms varied widely from group to group, often drawing from the collective interactions and needs of students and facilitators, as well as their extended social networks. In this way, the classrooms themselves, while sharing a common curriculum and unifying goals, came to embody a strikingly diverse collection of arrangements.

In light of the context provided in the preceding chapters, these variations and commonalities are perhaps unsurprising, as methods (essentially, ‘what are we going to do in class today’) are subject to often lively debate within literacy circles, and are informed and modified through social networks and personal experience. It is only natural that they would come to embody a wide range of expressions between communities and individual literacy circles. Conversely, more abstract theoretical considerations (e.g. ‘what does it mean to be literate?’) were infrequent if not absent topics of discussion in said circles, though they occasionally formed themes in training sessions provided by the institute. When they were referenced, they tended to focus on utilitarian valuations of the program and its goals – often in terms of the economic, developmental or personal gains enabled through the program.

It is interesting to note that the unifying themes of economic progress and developmental objectives became less central and explicit the farther classes strayed from institutionally prescribed classroom structure and coursework. Facilitator-student interactions and activities that reinforced the developmental or ‘functional’ aspects of
literacy (such as exercises involving monetary values or referencing financial exchanges; lectures extolling the economic benefits of literacy; or facilitators lobbying students to continue attending through appeals to such benefits) were most often encountered in relation or reference to official program materials. Conversely, interactions which reinforced the social and experiential aspects of literacy (such as the formation of a classroom marketplace; group support for members experiencing personal difficulties; or a break from studies to ‘gossip’) were often group-directed and uniquely structured through group negotiations and wider social ties to the surrounding community.

Similarly, conceptual discussions surrounding the roles and uses of literacy more broadly seemed to follow a comparable pattern. The relationships between literacy and development were never far from the foreground of any dialogue (whether among or between students, facilitators, or other IEEA staff) about the purposes of the program or the tangible value of literacy. However, the ideas of literacy as a community resource or having other social value were more often invoked in personal discussions of specific classroom experiences or of other members of the literacy circle. While the latter observation seems at first to be rather self-evident (of course the social qualities of literacy would be discussed through reference to social experience), it is significant that these references rarely occurred in relation to the program objectives, but rather were more often teased out of personal anecdotes or reflections relating to other members of the group or surrounding community. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this sort of anecdotal commentary on the value and uses of literacy also frequently referenced and reinforced its functional applications – including several oft quoted ‘institutional anecdotes’ disseminated and repeated through program materials and training sessions (such as the story of a student who took the wrong bus and was late for a job interview).

These sorts of patterns suggest that while training and materials provided through the program offer an overarching sense of direction and purpose to individual classrooms, the ways in which literacy is practised or experienced by both facilitators and students is highly variable and often malleable through locally encountered social interactions. In short, there appears to be a divide between locally and institutionally produced methods and conceptualizations of literacy and its uses. Furthermore, this divide seems to become more pronounced with time spent or experience acquired in
literacy circles. Those facilitators who had been working longest with the program were more likely to discuss and emphasize the social and experiential aspects of their work, as well as stray more frequently and farther from course curriculum; while newer initiates more often tended to highlight the developmental value of their work, and followed official class structure more closely where possible\textsuperscript{14}. However, due to previously discussed material and other economic and developmental constraints (see 4.3, 4.4), ‘sticking to the guide’ was not always a viable option. It was precisely in moments such as these that students and facilitators alike were prone to lively debate over the shape of their classes, and to the subsequent reformulation of classroom activities or reorganization of classes themselves based on negotiation, voting, or consensus.

These observations point to a situation where the meaning and objectives of literacy (at least, initially) are provided by the course itself, while actual literacy practices come to vary greatly over time. Interestingly, it is in some cases the very inability of the program to successfully implement its methodology (due no less to developmental, economic or material constraints which the program is broadly envisioned to alleviate) which may lead to unique shifts in classroom activities based on the social interactions and networks of class members. Over time, these sorts of dynamic methods can come to provide a lens through which literacy is conceptually refocused to include wider social and experiential elements. As facilitators come to more fully understand the many ways in which their classes have impacted the lives of their students (and their own), they may also come to understand the value of literacy as more than mere progress towards a goal. At the same time, its developmental or functional roles are reaffirmed through interactions with the Institute and with their students’ economic success stories.

\textsuperscript{14} It should be noted that these observations are not statistically significant, and may simply be coincidental. Nevertheless, these trends were strongly suggested due to the fact that experienced facilitators repeatedly referenced past classes or students when diverging from standard course work.
For facilitators, these simultaneous trends towards institutional and experiential conceptualizations of literacy can have several effects. On one hand, a clear sense of purpose and need is established through developmental associations that are reiterated and emphasized in training sessions and course materials, and those associations reinforced through the experiences and stories of class members. However, such stories and experiences also often provide impetus to reassess and broaden the narrowly defined pairing of literacy and development as synonymous or at least interdependent projects, looking instead to the social, communal, or even therapeutic roles played by literacy circles. Simultaneously, classroom activities and structure continually adapt to changing material and social circumstances, providing new arrangements of ideas and experiences from which different facets of literacy can emerge. In effect, there is a constant interplay between the standardization and localization of knowledge and practices relating to literacy, which is continually modified through the classroom experience as new members, activities, and encounters are integrated into literacy circles.

6.2. The Literacy Title: The significance of literate designations

In spite of the diversity of literacy practices, classroom arrangements, and even conceptualizations of literacy and its uses that can emerge from literacy circles, there still exists the political and administrative imperative to evaluate the successes or failures of individual students, specific classes, and the program as a whole. For literacy initiatives as broad in scope, numerically vast, and far reaching as ‘Yo Sí Puedo’, it is perhaps unavoidable that standard measures of efficacy are developed and employed across the program (see 4.1). In particular, the application of the ‘final exam’ (see 3.3) determined not only the administrative attribution of literate status for a student, but also the financial compensation (or lack thereof) for the facilitator that instructed them – they were granted a small stipend only for those students who had passed. Although facilitators demonstrated a continual willingness to teach without the surety or even promise of monetary reward (despite their own financial difficulties), the administrative necessity of hard statistical distinctions between literacy and illiteracy often raised other complications.
For one, it has already been shown that such titles do not necessarily reflect the realities of students’ circumstances. Some students who had attained the distinction and graduated had been unsuccessful on re-evaluation or indicated otherwise low retention rates; while other ‘returnees’ had demonstrated a wide range in their ability to reengage with course work, sometimes needing to return to previous lessons or reinitiate the program in its entirety (see 4.1; 5.3). This situation can often lead to incongruity between ‘literate’ as an administrative category and ‘literate capacities’ as defined by the program’s own evaluation mechanisms. This incongruity raises serious problems for educators and IEEA coordinators and administrators alike who are tasked with the elimination of illiteracy, yet required to work within the confines of a system of limited resources and the necessities of progress reports to state authorities. This is to say nothing of the potential difficulties encountered by students who may wish to pursue further primary education at a later date and be potentially unable to meet course requirements. In this light, it is no small wonder that differing statistical evaluations of literacy in Oaxaca are often at odds with each other (see 2.3).

Furthermore, this disjunctive arrangement of literacy skills and the signifier of ‘literate’ is not solely an administrative distinction. Many of participating students often compared their relative skill sets during classes, both with each other and with the facilitator or other class visitors. The tone of such interactions was frequently light hearted (though occasionally self-deprecatory), but almost invariably were focused on the activities provided in or derived from the official course workbooks. Comments such as “Well of course you can do it, you’re literate, not me!”; “We’re never going to be able to read and write [at this pace]”; or “Teacher! How many more lessons until we can read and write?” were commonplace during such activities, irrespective of the relative level of skill with which students were able to complete set tasks. The label of literacy itself (most often hedged in terms of a capacity to read and write) was almost always used by students to refer to themselves or others only after they had graduated from the program. In some cases, this could lead to incredulous reactions from students towards other returnees to the circle: “But why are you having so much trouble? You can already read and write!”

These sorts of distinctions can lead to situations in which students may consider themselves literate, yet later be unable to recreate the classroom activities which led
them to the title initially – or vice versa. For instance, one of Ximena’s students had spent more than two weeks crafting a poem for a love interest, but was conflicted about its delivery. He was proud of his accomplishment, but ashamed of his ‘illiteracy’ – a signifier he repeatedly insisted applied to him in spite of his ability to write the letter, the importance of which he downplayed: “That? That’s just a little thing”. Examples such as this help to illustrate the conceptual break between literacy practices which relate to specific course objectives, and those which fill other roles in the lives of students. It is the former set of practices that are tied up with the title of literacy and which serve as a means of attaining it – both from the standpoint of students’ self-perception and the evaluative component of the program. The latter set of practices, while potentially filling meaningful roles in the lives of students and their interactions within their wider social networks, may not necessarily inform or modify the designation of ‘literate’.

Facilitators themselves may also help to reinforce this distinction, as literacy was often defined in class in relation to specific course objectives (such as the ability to recognize and reproduce a letter or word several times). Even when classroom activities deviated from official methods, students and facilitators alike often acknowledged that they were ultimately working towards the goal of taking and passing the final exam. When classes did engage in broader departures from class structure (such as to provide support for a group member or to ‘gossip’), it was routinely accompanied by an admission of ‘distraction’ from their work, even if the topics of conversation related to reading and writing, and how they affected their personal lives. Given the lack of explicit discussion in both training sessions and classrooms themselves about the meanings of literacy (beyond their functional utility – see 6.1), it is only reasonable that questions such as ‘what does it mean to be literate’, and ‘how can I become literate’ be filled by the structured path laid out through the program. However, this may also serve to legitimize particular conceptions and practices related to literacy over others.

Given the observations presented thus far, it is fair to question how the title of ‘literate’ and the practices and concepts it legitimizes come to shape the ways in which literacy is understood by participants in literacy circles. The fact that the provision of the program is measured statistically in terms of success or failure (in terms of an attributed administrative, yet socially meaningful category), and that the program itself is conceptually positioned as both harbinger and gateway to development (see Chapter 4;
6.1), suggests that the title of literacy can become closely tied up with ideas of development, personal success and economic growth. In this sense, 'legitimate' literacy becomes an identity which is an inherent signifier of progress – both as an individual accomplishment and as participation in wider advancements within the community.

However, to claim that the title of literate is solely defined by these characteristics would also be to ignore the significant ways in which students employ the status in their social worlds and personal lives. As has been shown, the personal attainment of literacy (or even simply the initiation of the task) can be a significant tool in the deflection of social shame, the inspiration of confidence to demand and attain recognition and influence within the household (and even those of others), or the organization of political lobbying. It is interesting that these sorts of outcomes are enabled through a conceptual frame that nevertheless obscures (or at least relegates to secondary importance) a vision of literacy that is defined by social life. The title of ‘literate’ then, while embodying a relatively narrow, largely functional definition of literacy, can in fact come to represent a much broader influence in the lives of students, particularly when mobilized in relation to the new social ties and communities forged through participation in literacy circles.

6.3. **Looking Forward:**

**Reconciling policy, practice, and theory**

Before turning to a discussion of the wider significance of these findings, it may be useful to highlight some of the potential limitations of the current research. For one, although each class, its students, and facilitator were extensively investigated, the relatively small number of participating groups means that systematic comparisons were not a primary focus of the research. As a result, some correlative observations (such as the possibility of a trend towards facilitators’ emphasis on social and experiential aspects of literacy over time) are not intended to be statistically significant – rather they are employed to illustrate connections between disparate concepts and highlight the potential for their interaction. Furthermore, although the investigative focus on facilitators themselves was initially intended to enable a greater understanding of the links between institutional pedagogy and classroom practices, the lack of systematic institutional analysis coupled with the relative independence of facilitators’ activities meant that
institutional policy and theory were relegated to a more contextualizing role. Future research may benefit from a more comprehensive investigation of the actors or documentation within the IEEA or other similar organizations. Additionally, although the classrooms studied showed marked similarities in certain aspects of their experiences, it is unclear the extent to which observations could be extrapolated to other literacy circles within the state of Oaxaca. In particular, observations underscoring the interrelated nature of literacy and development may be at least partially the result of the peri-urban landscape in which participant communities were located and the realities of continued urbanization.

Beyond these limitations, the research raised a number of potential avenues of investigation for further study. For example, it may be interesting to explore in greater detail the similar, yet differing pedagogical approaches to literacy education assumed by the Mexican (‘La Palabra’) and Cuban (‘Yo Sí Puedo’) programs. In particular, the attempts at ‘cultural authenticity’ (such as the use of ‘archetypal characters’ in videoclasses, or the use of mole recipes in class exercises); the administrative debates that emerge in their wake; and their interpretations by students and facilitators all seem to hold intriguing questions for the application of literacy programs within and between nations. Similarly, an exploration of how these or similar programs are ‘localized’ at an institutional level might yield noteworthy insights into some of their underlying assumptions about cultural relevance and the very students at whom they are aimed. Some of the comments provided by facilitators also pointed to the possibility of wider relationships between literacy education and other less commonly associated phenomena on both macro and micro scales. A widespread, quantitative investigation into the possible association of literacy education and violence reduction, or a focused qualitative exploration of the therapeutic value of literate identities might generate new theoretic directions or debates within the field of literacy studies. Furthermore, the unique international arrangement of such literacy projects themselves also produce fascinating new sites and participants for research from a wide range of thematic approaches. For example, a study which worked closely with Cuban coordinators and foregrounded their experiences as foreign service workers would likely make for an absorbing read. Such things are largely beyond the scope of the present research, but it is difficult not to view some of them as ‘missed opportunities’.
Despite these unexplored questions, the discussions throughout the previous chapters highlight a number of key findings. The application of the Yo Sí Puedo program, and the ways in which it is understood to simultaneously enable and be enabled through other developmental projects and material realities, have created strong conceptual associations between literacy and development more broadly. These associations may be particularly salient in peri-urban communities, where the arrival of literacy programs is accompanied by a number of other indicators of urbanization and progress. However, the formation of literacy circles, their structure, locations, methods and activities continue to be shaped through the personal histories and social networks of their participants. Furthermore, literacy classes themselves offer the potential formation of new communities within literacy circles, and the reformulation of or interactions with existing social relationships beyond them. The interplay between these developmental and social or experiential visions of literacy can play a significant role in the modification of facilitators’ methods and understandings of literacy more broadly – and ultimately in the institutionally informed, yet locally produced experiences of their students. However, the need for statistically relevant assessment on large scales can create a singular goal for the program, and emphasize the achievement of a title which serves to reinforce a narrow definition of literacy, even while its uses are applied by students to their lives more broadly. What then, can be learned from these observations?

Fundamentally, there appears to be a tension between administrative imperatives and the on-the-ground realities of the application of the program. Naturally, this can lead to uncertainty over the ‘success’ of the program and the assessment of individual students, literacy circles or the accomplishments of the program as a whole. This tension may be further exacerbated by the fact that although the Institute, facilitators, and students seem to agree on the basic criteria for the achievement of literacy, the ways in which it is actually attained or its subsequent roles in the personal lives of students and their communities can be highly divergent. From the standpoint of the IEEA, the unifying objective of the program is to provide students with a literacy skill set that can be used to enter and successfully complete the primary education curriculum. This is not to say that members of the Institute are unaware or otherwise unaccommodating of literacy circles that branch out from official activities; only that
these sorts of local expressions of the program are not their primary focus. On the other hand, the objectives and experiences of students and even facilitators themselves may or may not coincide with the educational plan or mandate of the IEEA. They may instead reflect a range of other personal and social commitments. A student may indeed go on to further their studies and even find material prosperity in the use of their acquired skill sets; or they may find more fulfilment in returning to the social environments in which they are taught. A facilitator may view the goals of their lessons as the facilitation of their students’ capacities to pass the final exam; or they may see their classroom as a means of enjoyment or distraction from other difficult realities. Nor are any of these options mutually exclusive.

What then, is happening in these cases? Is this literacy that fails to achieve when it fails to transform its objects in a specific fashion, or according to a singular narrative? Can the program be said to have ‘succeeded’ despite the 55% (see 4.1) of students who showed only partial to minimal retention rates upon re-evaluation? Perhaps these only seem to be dilemmas when we hedge our descriptions of literacy in terms of ‘successes’ and ‘failures’, which in and of themselves only serve to reassert linear developmental visions of literacy. It might be more useful to ask: what is success and failure in relation to the multiple, contextually specific and negotiated literacies described by Street (1993), Lewis et al. (2007) and others? In light of the many ways in which Oaxacan facilitators and students have come to incorporate literacy into their lives, it seems a facile and incomplete evaluation to simply check a box on a list – assigning literate or illiterate status to participants in the program. And yet, these distinctions not only serve important administrative and political functions, but are readily understood and adopted by students and facilitators alike.

In 1991, Niko Besnier (building on the work of Street) suggested that literacy practices need to be understood in relation to their ‘contexts of use’. This approach, he argued, “opens the door for the study of hitherto devalued literacy traditions in their own right” (Besnier 1991: 571). Although it was the adoption of this suggestion that has led to some of the critiques of sociocultural literacy research as mired in specifics; the idea of ‘contexts of use’ may provide a more fruitful means of conceptualising ‘achievement’ and evaluating the effects of adult literacy programs. This would be, in essence, evaluation removed from standards of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ (or even partial success as determined
by a sliding scale), and refocused on individually and communally crafted goals. Rather than working towards predetermined objectives, literacy circles might be able to set their own goals and define the value of literacy within them. That does not mean that adult literacy programs cannot or should not be evaluated with broader criteria, simply that the basis for such evaluations is far from universal, and that it is the participants of literacy circles themselves who possess the unique capacity to do so.

In this sense, program development and application as well as assessment might be more fruitfully managed through decentralized educational strategies that emphasize local theoretical inputs and control of educational resources, a suggestion that has already been brought forward by some theorists (Mauratona and Cervero 2004). Though this strategy in itself carries significant difficulties (e.g. how ‘locality’ in itself is defined and constructed), it offers at least one potential inroad to reconciling the present gap between adult literacy in theory and practice. Although such a paradigm would likely be difficult to reconcile with current funding models\textsuperscript{15}, it also raises the possibility of building bridges between more than two decades of sociocultural insights into literacy practices on one hand, and the application of such knowledge in policy spheres on the other. Moreover, it would foreground locally produced insights into the meanings and uses of literacy, as well as alternative methods through which they can be explored.

It is this very process of locally produced insights that Freire (1970) envisioned in his description of the emancipatory value of praxis in education. However, it is important to remember that while Freire imagined the transformative power of education to be rooted in reflection and action to modify dominant ideological models and structures of power, the present research suggests that this is not always the case. Indeed, for some students it was not a newfound understanding of literacy and its roles that enabled them to transform their lives, but rather the adoption of a predefined title (and with it the

\textsuperscript{15} This recognition could be used as the basis for a ‘practically minded’ critique of this strategy, or alternatively a critique of the ways in which funding models are themselves structured.
assumptions of a dominant model) and its mobilization within their existing and newly formed social networks and communities. In this way, it is not necessarily an ideological shift, nor the broad reformulation of existing educational structures that became a significant agent of change. Rather, the act of participation itself in literacy circles created social spaces through which a variety of outcomes emerged, often in ways that differ for each person involved. It is through engagement with these spaces that renegotiation and reformulation of the program can begin to occur in each literacy circle on localized scales. In particular, the role of facilitators in this process can become increasingly important, as experience and participation in repeated groups helps to broaden their methodological toolkit and their conceptual understandings of the value and uses of literacy.

Ultimately, the ways in which participants in literacy circles apply these experiences to their lives may diverge or converge with each other or with the preconceived ‘purpose’ of the program. This recognition may hold valuable lessons for the disjuncture between functional and sociocultural theorists of adult literacy. While the importance of social context and local communities in understanding the practices of facilitators and students is undeniable; it also seems that the developmental objectives of literacy education emphasized in the functional approach are often the same ones adopted and strived towards by students and facilitators themselves. In the end, who is anyone else to judge what constitutes the ‘objectives’ of literacy education? It is only prudent to acknowledge the realities of a functional paradigm in the designs and aspirations of some students and their construction of literate identities. That being said, a literate identity, even one based on a model of development and its functional value, can nevertheless be employed in many facets of social worlds – and to aims far beyond the functional capacity to read and write. Future investigations by theorists from both schools of literacy research might benefit from the further exploration of these interconnections.

In another sense, the gap between ‘competing’ theories of literacy is already beginning to narrow. Although a developmental focus in policy continues to foreground functional paradigms in adult literacy education, many authors have already begun to actively search for new ways of asserting their relevance to wider systems of educational resource distribution – whether through the introduction of new conceptual fields and
theoretical links, or through novel and experimental approaches to methodology such as multi-sited ethnography and mixed methods approaches (see Papen 2007; Rogers and Street 2012). Nevertheless, the results of these new directions are still far from certain. Perhaps what is needed is the creation of new academic spaces for the interchange of ideas and collaboration between researchers from disparate paradigmatic orientations. Indeed, if the lessons from Oaxacan literacy circles teach us anything, it is that such spaces can provide fruitful grounds for the interchange and innovation of new ideas and practices. Without such attempts, literacy studies may well continue to be rooted in two opposing, yet incommunicative camps well into the next decade. If on the other hand, such attempts are successful, we may have the opportunity to create real changes in the way adult literacy education is envisioned and practised on local, national, and global scales.

The insights from Oaxacan educators and students are not limited in relevance solely to studies of literacy and development (interdisciplinary though they may be). They may also inform a wide variety of contemporary discussions in anthropology and other social sciences relating to much broader theoretical trends. Beyond simply its lessons for the anthropology of education, studies such as these hold intriguing questions for a discipline that has increasingly turned towards concentrated ethnographic study of public policy and institutions in which anthropologists themselves may hold at least partial membership (Mosse 2006). More than just a series of methodological concerns over access and transparency however, these approaches may help to inspire new theoretical inroads in a discipline moving progressively towards engagement with applied practice and frames of reference which cross-cut regional, national, and institutional boundaries (Knauft 2006).

More specifically, the present research may help to illuminate longstanding debates on the cultural nature of identity and its relationship to differential conceptions of modernity (Gable 2006; Ferguson 1999). As has been shown, literate identities envisioned by academic discourse are not always the same ones constructed by the very communities about which they are written. In this way, vastly different visions of modernity may simultaneously come to co-exist in close social and institutional proximity. It is these very proximities that hold promise for anthropological and other social researchers increasingly concerned with exploring the spaces between and
hybrids of traditional frames of reference (Gupta & Ferguson 1992). It is not just at the borders between nations, societies, or cultures that new insights and directions might be found, however. If Oaxacan literacy circles are any indication, we can also find them at the verges of more intimate social spaces and their multiple connections to other ideas, people, institutions, and landscapes.
References


Rogers, Alan & Street, Brian (2012). *Adult Literacy and Development.* Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.


Appendix. Organizational Map: IEEA Oaxaca

*Regional and Central Departments work directly with each other, while informing Coordinators
**These positions are not necessarily filled for every Municipal Coordination. The responsibilities of Technical Assistants and Promoters are thus often interchangeable. Where both positions are unfilled, any other administrator from Regional or Central offices may assume their duties.
***Cuban Coordinators assist and advise at all organizational levels.