

NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND LITERACY LEARNING IN A MAYAN SCHOOL IN GUATEMALA

By

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ABSTRACT

Faculty, staff and alumni from Rowan University recently traveled to Antigua, Guatemala to conduct a technology assessment, so that a three to four times yearly teacher training program can be expanded to a year round online professional development program. Since 2002, Rowan Reading Professor Midge Madden and Professor Emeritus Jane Sullivan have been promoting literacy in Guatemala public schools through teacher workshops and more focused week-long literacy institutes.

Illiteracy is a critical problem in Guatemala, where 77% of the population do not attend school beyond sixth grade. Three realities contribute to this statistic: 1) there is limited access to middle and high schools for many students, particularly poor children in rural areas; 2) public schooling is not free; students must buy their own books/supplies and uniforms; and 3) teacher training is at best minimal - elementary school teachers need only a high school diploma and there are few baccalaureate teacher training programs to train middle and high school teachers.. Consequently, large numbers of people in Guatemala cannot read or write. The Republica de Guatemala Instituto Nacional de Estadistica Censos Nacionales XI de Poblacion y VI de Habitacion 2002 reports the following: Education, public and private, is paid for by individual families. The only difference between public and private is the level of cost. Public education costs less, but oftentimes it is too much for the average family and the children are not able to study.

Fact: 67% of all Guatemalans children age between 7-14 years old do not attend school.

This is the reality of schooling in Guatemala.

INTRODUCTION

Professors Madden's and Sullivan's work began first as teacher training sessions across many schools. As a recipient of IRA's Constance McCullough grant, Dr. Sullivan invited Midge Madden to join her in giving a week of workshops in Antigua, Guatemala. While there, Patty Rosales, a Guatemalan teacher and friend invited them to speak to the staff of teachers at a small school for poor children known as Escuela Integrada. The hope that was seen on these young teachers' eyes and their enthusiasm for learning convinced both professors to develop a more long-lasting structure for teacher training in Guatemala.

The story of Integrada's beginning

Rebecca and Andrew Loveall, an American couple new to Guatemala, noticed many children in the streets of Antigua, "working children," who earned money for their families by shining shoes, making and selling handicrafts all for a pittance. Rebecca and Andrew

understood that these children needed to work in order to eat and sustain their families; yet, they worried that so many children were not receiving an education. So they proposed a plan of providing breakfast and lunch for these children, to make them attend school". Driven by their vision, Integrada Escuela was born. All the students who attend are poor and unlike most public schools in Guatemala, their families pay nothing for them to attend. In a country where classes are often made up of as many as forty or fifty children, Integrada limits the class size with twenty-five students.

The teachers, like other public school teachers in Guatemala, have had limited training-the last two years of high school that include a few months of observing in the classroom. In the words of one of the teachers at Integrada, "I went into the classroom knowing that I must plan and that I must maintain discipline and little else. So, I taught my students the way I had been taught. I dictated

to them and they wrote my words in their notebooks.” This was the Integrada where our work began. No books but only a little understanding of literacy instruction ... but much teacher ingenuity, resourcefulness, and love for their students. No books and reading curriculums ... but children wide-eyed with curiosity who yearned to know.

The authors later knew that many systems are needed to be changed if they were to make a difference. Neither textbooks nor independent learning books existed. Thus, the first priority became to establish a library of books. As members of the international project committee of New Jersey Reading Association, they collected money and sponsored packaged books to them. As books came to Integrada, teachers and students poured over the stories. For two years these Rowan professors (and two other New Jersey Reading Association members, Perry Stio and Sue Hopson) visited Integrada, observing classrooms, modeling teaching strategies and working with children. But the more that Madden and Sullivan observed, the more they realized that teachers did not know how to use these books in their teaching. And many children could only read the pictures. They realized that books alone would not make the difference in Integrada's success. Teachers began asking about instructional strategies for using books. “How do children become readers and writers?” “What is it that we should know?”

Literacy Institutes: Collaborative and Interactive

And so began the second phase of their work with Integrada Escuela. Research has long supported the idea of school reform as needing systematic, ongoing professional development (Allen, 2006; Symonds, 2003). Madden had discovered this first hand in her work with Coalition for Essential Schools and argues that there needs to be a long term commitment on the part of teacher educators, administration, and teachers.

Madden and Sullivan offered Integrada this promise of long-term support and collaboration; and a new plan for learning at Integrada emerged. Rebecca Loveall, the school director, Glenda Lopez, the principal, and the teachers worked with Madden and Sullivan to develop the first week-long Literacy Institute in October, 2005. Over

the course of one year, they made three week-long visits to Integrada and presented three more literacy institutes - three hour-workshops each afternoon, for a total of thirty hours. They developed a course of study designed for pre-service teachers, beginning with techniques for literacy assessment, then continuing with strategies for teaching the essentials of reading and writing.

Madden and Sullivan believe that teacher demonstration of any reading and writing process serves as the critical factor in establishing effective practices. Their model in the literacy institutes is to explain and demonstrate a strategy, then the teachers worked in pairs to “try out” that strategy themselves. They then ask teachers to bring that strategy to the classroom and practice it with their students. During the mornings, Madden and Sullivan visited classrooms, observed and videotaped the teachers as they applied the various techniques they had learned. At afternoon meetings professors and teachers viewed teaching videotapes, used learning protocols to critique, clarified misconceptions and answered questions. Then Madden and Sullivan added new knowledge to that learning. Always they emphasized the importance of evidence of student learning. They continually asked “What shows you that students are becoming better readers and writers?”. They introduced the idea of student artifacts as evidence of learning and poured over this “data” with the teachers in our afternoon sessions.

The Madden and Sullivan also wanted to ensure that the teachers understood the connection between text difficulty and readers' ability. Because testing materials were unavailable, they demonstrated how to take a “running record.” They also developed a rubric for evaluating a “retelling.” They administered running records and retellings to young students and videotaped the process. Then, in the afternoon sessions, teachers saw first hand how to take a running record and how to assess using a retelling.

The authors combined the essentials of literacy teaching word study, fluency, comprehension and writing - into the strategies they demonstrated. They emphasized strategies that were most applicable regardless of the

type of material, strategies such as activating schema or background knowledge, making connections, predicting, self-monitoring, determining which ideas are important, and summarizing. They modeled graphic organizers that would be useful in Integrada's classrooms. They formed teacher book clubs wherein teachers read novels such as *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen and *Paula* by Isabel Allende. They modeled how proficient readers talk about books, teaching reader response theory and holding "grand conversations" about books. Teachers learned the power of talk about texts a new experience for many of them.

Teachers also watched a demonstration of "readers theater." They then chose a text, created a script and performed their own versions (which were videoaped and critiqued). Using Georgia Heard's concept of "found poems," teachers clipped words from newspapers, pasted them into poetic format and performed them for others in the class. Madden and Sullivan introduced the elements of good narrative writing. Madden shared a "sweet memory" of her own and demonstrated examples of dialogue, inner monologue, descriptive language, flashbacks and other literary techniques in her memory story. Teachers then wrote their own "sweet memories", poignant and powerful. In a final writers' sharing, all laughed and cried together at the beauty of their stories. This made the teachers to understand why writing matters in their world and in their students' worlds. And teachers began to envision ways to help their students unlock hidden memories and share with each another.

At the fourth institute, Madden and Sullivan introduced backward mapping and showed the Integrada faculty how to "back-plan". Teachers used the knowledge accumulated in past institutes and ongoing teacher sharing groups to think deeply about effective ways to teach reading and writing. They worked in grade level groups over two days to predict where they wanted their students to be in the literacy-learning process at the end of the year and to create a year-long curriculum that would take them there.

Bringing Technology to Integrada

The most recent institute in July 2007 focused again on writing. But important differences occurred. Madden invited a graduate of the Master of Science in Teaching (MST) Collaborative Education Program at Rowan, Jessica Feldman, to train the primary teachers in the week-long institute. Feldman, certified both as a highly qualified K-8 teacher and a special education teacher, currently teaches in the Galloway Public School District in a second grade inclusion classroom. Madden also invited Eileen Stutzbach, an instructional technology specialist at Rowan University, to accompany them. Stutzbach planned to document their work and explore possibilities for bringing technology to Integrada beyond videotaped lesson and critique sessions in the teacher institutes.

Although Madden and Sullivan have had preliminary discussions with university administrators in Guatemala about the possibility of distance learning, but the progress has been slow. Consequently, Madden has begun investigating the possibility of online teacher training through Rowan University. Her vision includes using the Integrada school as a model, not unlike the professional development schools affiliated with Rowan. In a country where transportation is slow and difficult, establishing centers of learning where more teachers might have access to classrooms such as those at Integrada would improve the quality of teaching across the country.

Escuela Integrada is unique in its goals of excellence in education for the "working children" of the country. It has embraced a model of teacher learning little known and tried in Guatemala and the faculty and staff of this school have demonstrated that such a model of ongoing, systematic and consistent teacher education can succeed. Madden's and Sullivan's believe about the best ways to impact teacher practice and student learning, and it has been validated by the enthusiasm and the response they received each time when they visit Integrada. "We are honored and humbled to be considered part of the Integrada family," Madden comments. "And as their teacher educators, we believe that Integrada must "go public" with their learning." Integrada faculty did in February 2007 at the Sixth

International Reading Conference in Guatemala City. They told the story of Integrada and shared with an audience of fifty or sixty international educators, the ways that their teaching has improved and the impact of new teaching practices on their students' learning.

This fall with Stutzbach's assistance, Professors Madden and Sullivan plan to expand their teacher training program using Polycomm technology and Rowan Virtual Meeting. The Polycomm unit will allow the Integrada teachers to converse with Rowan faculty and students synchronously over an audio-video feed. This will enable teachers to ask follow up questions about the techniques they've learned in the institute, learn new techniques and brainstorm about problems in the classroom. Untapped possibilities exist with this new approach. Madden is currently working on providing weekly talk times where Integrada teachers and experienced Rowan faculty can communicate about literacy concerns and effective teaching strategies.

Madden and Sullivan also plan to use the Rowan Virtual Meeting (RVM) online site. RVM was developed by staff in Rowan's Department of Instructional Technology. Through RVM, teachers will be able to meet online to view PowerPoint slides and video vignettes and contribute to a discussion board.

The addition of these new technologies should reinforce and enhance the model of literacy institutes which has already proved to be successful in training teachers and

in teaching students how to read and write. According to Director Rebecca Loveall, Escuela Integrada students are testing well on high school entrance examinations in part because of the skills their teachers have learned through the literacy institutes given by Professors Madden and Sullivan. The addition of online technologies to the quarterly face to face institutes should enhance the teaching and learning of Guatemalan teachers ensuring greater success for Integrada students.

Looking Forward

The Integrada/Rowan story ends here, but Professor Madden believes that the work has barely begun. She reflects on hers and Professor Sullivan's work:

Change occurs slowly; working in Guatemala, we have learned to accept this fact and to embrace cultural differences as part of new learning. Schooling in Guatemala has long been that of rote learning through dictation and copying. But we believe that with patience, determination and an unwavering vision, we can succeed in helping more children in Guatemala become fully literate. It may take a generation, perhaps even more, but efforts must continue, the word must spread.

In the end, the journey is only a beginning. As Madden and Sullivan learn, they, in turn, share their learning with others ... as they grow in understanding Guatemala and its teachers, they, in turn, will grow in understanding, of their teaching and their students. That is hope and dream of the authors.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dr. Midge Madden, Assistant Professor at Rowan University, works with pre-service and in-service teachers as professor of undergraduate and graduate literacy courses at Rowan University. She also has served as reading and writing consultant in New Jersey and Maryland schools as well as in Antigua, Guatemala. She brings much expertise both as faculty and as teacher researcher. Past studies include a critical look at her practice as a teacher of university students (The study is forthcoming in her book, Dilemmas of Teaching Literacy Critically) as well as a current collaborative work with a fifth grade teacher looking at critical literacy curriculums using the genre of provocative texts. Other research includes work in writing in the elementary classroom, much of which appears in a recently co-authored book, Teaching the Elements of Powerful Writing, published by Scholastic in 2004. Currently, Dr. Madden is working on a new book that targets fluency instruction in fifth and sixth grades, to be published by Scholastic. Several of the lessons will use I-movie technology such as script writing and voice overs to help students improve in fluency.

