

ADULT LITERACY AMONG THE HISPANIC POPULATION OF CENTRAL
TEXAS: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND OUTCOMES

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
With a Major in Spanish
May 2014

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DEDICACIÓN

Este trabajo es dedicado a todos los amigos del centro que me ayudaron a completarlo. Su tiempo y sus historias lo hicieron posible, y en el proceso me cambiaron la vida. Gracias por enseñarme y compartir sus vidas conmigo. Se lo agradezco con todo corazón.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this project would not have been possible without the unconditional love and support of my parents, Fred and Martha, and my brother Ash. Nor would it have come to fruition without the unwavering encouragement of my Austin family; Suman, Troy and the babies who remind me not to take life so seriously.

I would like to thank wholeheartedly Dr. Robert Fischer, Dr. Catherine Jaffe and the Department of Modern Languages as well as Dean Hennessy and the College of Liberal Arts for their academic and financial support, without which the thesis would not be possible.

Thank you to my committee members Dr. Matthew Juge for your time and feedback; and to Dr. Susan Plann for dedicating so much time and providing so much encouragement, as well as sharing your guidance and expertise throughout this entire process even from out of state.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis director, Dr. Yasmine Beale-Rivaya, for far more than can be expressed in a short paragraph. Thank you for all of the time you spent reading and revising my work; for making me a better scholar by showing me the value of hard work; for being an active participant in my academic journey and for always being on my side. Your confidence in me gave me confidence in myself, and your presence in my life is invaluable.

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ABSTRACT

Literacy, in the most basic sense of the word, is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the quality, condition, or state of being literate; the ability to read and write.”(OED 2013) With respect to the immigrant populations in the United States, the term “literacy” is often used to describe a lack of ability to speak and comprehend the English language and is not necessarily restricted to actual reading level or ability. In the United States, the number of people who are unable to read or write in any language is believed to be around 1% (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.). Given the presence of many undocumented and uncounted immigrants, this number could be higher. Whatever the true number is, the inability to read or write in any language can have catastrophic consequences both on individual and societal levels, including (but not limited to) socioeconomic vulnerability, social insertion problems, low employability, lesser upward mobility and lack of awareness of rights/duties (United Nations 2010, pg. 8). Additionally, Fishman cites a “lack of literacy or schooling” as one of the primary reasons that heritage languages such as Spanish do not get passed on from one generation to the next (5).

Some of these consequences manifest themselves quite quickly, through low employability and economic problems on an individual level; while others, such as language loss, is a longer-term and not as obvious outcome. As an adult, the decision to learn to read and write is not one that is taken lightly. It requires time and dedication, and usually requires some sort of transportation. Having a support system helps as well. One can discuss at length reasons why people do not read and write –whether they simply do not have access to appropriate resources, whether they don't realize they have access to these resources, or why they simply may choose not to take advantage of them. What is seldom addressed, however, is the reason an adult chooses to begin the process of becoming literate or choosing to obtain a basic education. It is easy to assume that they want a better job, a higher salary, citizenship, etc. Until someone sits down to ask them, however, we are lingering in a world of assumptions and hypothetical situations.

In this case study, the goal was to determine the motivating factors that drive an adult belonging to the Spanish-speaking immigrant community to overcome their inability to read and write and embark on a new journey in education. Individual interviews were conducted because individual stories are

important; it is imperative to understand where a person comes from, the situation they live in and the trajectory of their life in order to properly understand their individual reason for working toward literacy. Given the demographic with which I worked, I considered that their motivations for obtaining reading and writing skills may be different than those of the general population. For example, attaining citizenship or desiring to eventually learn English may be of concern to these students. The interviews were conducted at a non-profit organization that services this demographic in central Texas, and I explored the most common factors for pursuing a basic education once in the US and, when possible, understand the effects of doing so.

CHAPTER I

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In order to properly contextualize this research, it is first necessary to survey the literature that speaks to the themes presented in this paper – essentially, Latinos and literacy. These materials will present a contextual foundation for the issues concerning the demographic, and will be presented in the following order: first, current definitions of the term “literacy”; second, a snapshot of the Spanish-speaking immigrant demographic in the United States, including historical events that fostered the establishment of the Spanish-speaking community in the US as well as current immigration trends; and third, a snapshot of education in Latin America and describes literacy specifically in the context of Latinos in the United States.

Literacy: Definitions and Consequences

According to Laurie Elish-Piper, a literate person in the year 1900 was one who could sign his or her name (4). However, the skills necessary to function in today’s society go far beyond a signature, and as a result the definition has evolved. “The most common contemporary definition of adult literacy centers on an adult’s ability to read and write in relation to daily activities at home, at work and in the community (Elish-Piper 4).

The term literacy has been used for so many different purposes that there is confusion in its use amongst scholars. David Barton distinguishes *basic literacy* from *functional literacy*:

The notion of *basic literacy* is used for the initial learning of reading and writing which adults who have never been to school need to go through. The term *functional literacy* is kept for the level of reading and writing which adults are thought to need in modern complex society. Use of the term underlines the idea that although people may have basic levels of literacy, they need a different level to operate in their day-to-day lives (195).

Paulo Freire on the other hand defines literacy as:

To acquire **literacy** is more than to psychologically and mechanically dominate reading and writing techniques. It is to dominate those techniques in terms of consciousness; to understand what one reads and to write what one understands: it is to *communicate* graphically. Acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words or syllables--lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe--but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one's context (86).

The extent to which adults “acquire literacy” based on Freire’s definition is important to acknowledge: the better one’s grasp on reading and writing becomes, the more apt he or she would be to better succeed in society as a result of better communication skills and a stronger ability to self-educate, which could in turn motivate and empower him or her. In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) uses two modified definitions of the term: *Skills-based literacy*, which is defined as

“successful use of printed material is a product of two classes of skills: word-level reading skills and higher-level literacy skills” is the first step to acquiring *task-based literacy*, which is considered the “ability to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential (NCES 2003)”

Though seemingly different, the definitions proposed by Barton, Freire and NCES share commonalities; all three reference an initial level of literacy: knowing how to read and write, as well as a more advanced level: being able to make sense of what one is reading/writing and using it on a higher level.

For the purpose of this study, the term literacy will be used in reference to one’s ability to read and write on the most basic of levels – how well the person can recognize groups of letters to form words and sentences. Learning to

recognize letters and read words is the very first step in being able to acquire a higher level of literacy as defined by the aforementioned definitions. As a result, the inability to read and write can be quite inhibitive and have serious implications on the quality of life of an individual.

It would seem that listing the benefits of being able to read and write could be considered overkill, given that most of us who are reading this paper likely learned to read and write at a very young age and have used our abilities day in and day out over the course of our lifetime. However, it is important to mention them as we often take them for granted; so much that we may not even realize that we are using literacy and how beneficial it truly can be.

There are several short-term benefits of being able to read and write; we can tell time, we can make lists, take messages, understand road signs and directions, read emails – the list is unending. We read for information, and we read (and sometimes write) for pleasure. A significant portion of our day is spent doing things, although we may not realize it, that require at minimum a basic ability in literacy.

In addition to short-term benefits of being able to read and write (reading a book for pleasure, for example, or leaving our spouse a “honey-do” list), there are long-term benefits as well. Andrew Wells (4) discusses how literacy can impact a culture: “Humans, uniquely in the animal world, have the capacity to

stop their cultural inventions from unwinding by remembering them long enough to be able to improve them; writing things down clearly helps this process". Kirsch, et. al. discuss the impact of literacy (or non-literacy) on a person's role in society:

In this changing America, the skills that participants in adult education programs do or do not develop have increasingly important implications in terms of their workforce participation, long-term self-sufficiency, acculturation and citizenship. A growing body of data shows that literacy and numeracy skills are associated with the likelihood that individuals will participate in life-long learning, keep abreast of social and political events, and vote in state and national elections in addition to obtaining and succeeding in a job. These data also suggest that literacy is likely to be one of the major pathways linking education and health and may be a contributing factor to the disparities that have been observed in the quality of health care in developed countries (91).

Kirsch, et. al. conclude, then, that the "noneconomic returns to literacy in the form of enhanced personal well-being and greater social cohesion(92)" are as important as economic and labor market returns.

Consistent with the idea that the benefits of literacy go beyond economics are the results of a study conducted by the United Nations (2010, pg. 8), which cites socioeconomic vulnerability, social insertion problems, low employability, lesser upward mobility and lack of awareness of rights/duties as just a few of the potential tribulations. These issues are two-sided; they affect not only the person/s who cannot read and write, but also the local/state/federal government and potentially the general community. As a matter of fact, in a study conducted by Georgia State University and the State Department of Education in Georgia (1978), a lower level of literacy in the state was shown to result in lower income levels and reduced job opportunities for the individuals involved. Additionally, a correlation was found between low statewide education and decreased voter participation, increased welfare costs, poorer civic involvement in politics, higher crime rates and the related costs of maintaining law enforcement and criminal justice systems. Economic problems associated with being unable to read and write are prevalent at both an individual and societal level. There are other devastating risks associated with illiteracy. Flegg (1982) found a direct correlation between a high rate of illiteracy and a high infant mortality rate in developing countries. It is possible that, in agreement with Caldwell (1979), a literate mother is more capable of or comfortable with demanding the attention of doctors and nurses than an illiterate one. This list is

not exhaustive, but does include some of the most obvious and troubling consequences of not being able to read and write.

In addition to the seemingly obvious socioeconomic consequences of illiteracy, there exist several lesser acknowledged linguistic consequences as well. Strucker concludes that the level of education one has in his or her native language has a direct impact on their ability to learn a second language (such as English) because “people with higher levels of native language literacy usually acquire literacy in English faster than those with lower levels of native language literacy(76).” Additionally, Fishman cites a “lack of literacy or schooling (5)” as one of the primary reasons that heritage languages such as Spanish do not get passed on from one generation to the next. A lack of motivation for maintaining heritage languages could possibly further the marginalization of said languages and their speakers, whereas a proactive attitude towards the transmission of these heritage languages from one generation to the next can actually serve to improve cultural relations on a societal level. Per Fishman:

Such increased recognition of diversity actually cements national unity and clears the boards for more rapid progress toward English mastery, too. If HL efforts ultimately get to be understood as contributing to America’s sense of safety, rationality and goodwill – as well as to internal HL community feelings of community

intergenerational continuity and acceptance – that will be akin to an “ugly-duckling” rebirth of America’s idealistic promise to “crown [its] good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea.

Fishman touches on a very important aspect of literacy as it relates to national unity and a sense of community among the groups that are coexisting. This study focuses specifically on Spanish-speaking immigrants; as such, the following section will provide a detailed history of immigration from the Spanish-speaking world and the establishment of the Spanish-speaking community in the United States.

The Spanish-speaking United States

The territory that now forms the United States was inhabited and later founded by immigrants in 1776 and, however unenthusiastically at times, has received immigrants on its shores ever since. Minority communities, such as the Spanish-speaking migrant groups from Mexico, Central and South America, comprise a large part of what is considered to be the “melting pot” of North America. This study focuses on the Spanish-speaking immigrant demographic as it is currently one of the most prevalent and misunderstood communities in the US. Migration from Mexico constitutes the largest immigrant community in the country at this time (CIS 2012), especially in the southwest, where a common border exists. Immigrants from Central and South America and the Caribbean

form a much smaller portion of the Hispanic demographic, but are often lumped together with Mexican people due to their common language.

Although the people from these regions speak different dialects of the same language that are different but mutually intelligible, their cultures differ greatly from each other and are unique in and of themselves. They should not be lumped together as one homogenous group when discussing cultural themes. It is important to note, however, that the reasons for which these groups relocate to the United States are generally the same, and can usually be traced to economic or political turmoil (Lipski 2008; Brick, Challinor & Rosenblum, 2011) or religious persecution (Bryant 2013). While Mexico is no exception, it shares a unique history with the United States that is important to examine when we evaluate the Spanish-speaking demographic in the US.

The present-day immigrants from Mexico are often treated like unwelcome newcomers; however, their community has been part of the United States for a long time. Lipski (77-82) provides a high-level history of some of the important events in US-Mexico history that have provided a foundation for the current prevalence and continued growth of the Mexican population in the United States; the first being the Mexican-American War, which concluded with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The former border between the US and Mexico was redrawn, and much of the territory that was formerly part

of northern Mexico now belonged to the United States. Many of those citizens never relocated.

Just as important in the establishment of the Mexican community north of the border was the Mexican Revolution. An estimated 890,000 people entered the US from Mexico during that 10-year period (PBS). Several years later during World War II, a large shortage of agricultural labor arose due to the demand for troops on the frontlines in the war. As such, the *Bracero* program was created to address the issue. The *Bracero* program fostered the legal entry of Mexican laborers into the United States on a temporary basis to work in the agricultural field. An estimated 4.6 million people entered the US as braceros during the length of the *Bracero* program (Bracero History Archive 2013). However, according to Lipski the perceived need for these laborers quickly diminished, and repatriation efforts were largely unsuccessful. In fact, he indicates that in the years following the end of the *Bracero* program, the waves of Mexican immigrants were larger than ever before. These large-scale historical events are what have given way to the large migratory waves of Mexican nationals that continue arriving on the shores of the United States today.

There have been several historical moments, largely political and/or economic in nature, that have also fostered the growth of the Central American population in the US. Lipski also provides some insight, citing the CIA-

engineered coup against Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954 followed by the increase in counterinsurgency campaigns in the 1970s; the Sandinista insurrection against the Somoza regime in Nicaragua in the late 70s; and the Salvadorian Civil War in the 1980s (150-181). In recent years, the number of Central American people who are arriving in the United States has increased substantially (Kahn 2013). According to Kahn, violence and economic hardship are the two principal reasons for present-day immigration.

Marginalized groups that are subjected to violence and economic hardship in Mexico and Central America (and at times from South America) often see a move to the United States as a way to start anew in a place where they are safe and can make enough money to provide for their families. Immigrating to the United States is not an easy decision to make, nor is it an easy task to undertake. If one is fortunate enough to be eligible for a visa – that is, they could be sponsored by a family member already in-country, sponsored by an employer, doing work for the US government, on political asylum, or reside in a country that is eligible for the Diversity Visa Program (“Visa types for Immigrants”) - one is not guaranteed, and the next step of obtaining a green card is process is even more lengthy and expensive. As such, many people choose to enter the country illegally, oftentimes by crossing dangerous territory and entering the US on foot. As a matter of fact, although illegal border crossing

has declined since 2005 as a result of increased border patrol, the number of deaths has not declined much at all (Moreno 2012).

The challenge of getting into the United States does not stop at attaining a visa or crossing the border: regardless of legal status, immigrant populations face a plethora of challenges once inside the country that can have a serious impact on their quality of life. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (2013)

Immigrants often perform some of the hardest, most dangerous jobs in our economy – for the least amount of pay. They are routinely cheated out of their wages and denied basic protections in the workplace. In their communities, they are subjected to racial profiling and harassment by law enforcement – and frequently forced to prove themselves innocent of immigration violations, regardless of their legal status. And they are, increasingly, targeted for violent hate crimes.

In a series of immigrant focus groups conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Vulnerable Populations Portfolio (2004-2005) several other issues affecting this demographic came to light. Immigrant parents were irritated by the lack of a quality education for their children, a concern that may have been due to their inability to communicate with the schools. They also cited a lack of

secure jobs available to the undocumented community, poor and overcrowded housing and cultural isolation as key points of their frustration. In accordance with the Southern Poverty Law Center's findings, the people who participated in the focus group studies shared their concerns about the prejudice and discrimination they had experienced.

At their very core, prejudice and discrimination are fueled by a lack of understanding; many times, US citizens are heard complaining that immigrants are in this country, and therefore should learn English. This is especially true in terms of the Spanish-speaking population. The demographic has grown so large that when we call a business, an automated option for Spanish is generally available. Road signs and billboards are often shown in Spanish, and pamphlets and other informational brochures are often distributed in English and Spanish. Many people in the US take issue with this, saying that the US should not have to distribute materials in Spanish. Additionally, many people mistakenly believe that English is the official language of the US when, in fact, it is not. At any rate, the same people who complain about the English-speaking ability of immigrants (or lack thereof) fail to realize that many of them don't come from a society where free, universal and mandatory education is enforced. The following section will provide a snapshot of education in Latin America and

why literacy and basic education, instead of the acquisition of English-language skills, should perhaps be a primary focus.

Latinos and Literacy

When literacy is discussed in terms of the immigrant population, it is most generally used to measure the English language abilities of those populations. Literacy as defined by this project, which refers to one's ability to read and write on the most basic of levels – how well the person can recognize groups of letters to form words and sentences - is not as frequently investigated, especially in the immigrant demographic. Gunawardena (1997) affirms that underprivileged communities (such as the immigrant population) are more likely to be affected by the lack of ability to read and write in any language:

Moreover, illiteracy is more likely to affect the underprivileged than the privileged; the poor, the female, ethnic, cultural or linguistic minorities and the handicapped are particularly at risk. ..Even when illiteracy exists on a limited scale, in small pockets of economic or social deprivation, it cannot be disregarded as of minor consequence, for in the life of the illiterate individual it extends beyond education; it affects his/her social status, economic possibilities and access to many forms of culture (597).

The Latin American immigrant demographic in the US is more likely to be affected by the inability to read and write than their peers in the United States, because the standards in the education system in that region are not equivalent to the US educational system. A report prepared by Ribando-Seelke for the Library of Congress notes that education indicators in Latin America lag behind those of not only the developed world, but also some developing countries in East Asia; additionally, when given international assessments students from the Latin American region tend to underperform, even when the comparison scores are limited to countries of similar income levels (2). Ribando-Seelke also points out that

“test scores on national exams for students of all education levels remain low, with students from rural, poor, Afro-descendant and Indigenous households having less access to quality education than the general population(2).”

This is a very important fact to consider, given that most of the people who choose to immigrate to the United States in any given year are more likely to come from a place of poverty than not. A study conducted by Raphael and Smolensky (2008) confirms this, and points out that immigrants from Mexico, Central and South America, and Asia tend to have the highest poverty rates, with Mexicans experiencing the most extreme cases of poverty. It is also

important to consider the population of immigrants from Latin America who are actually of indigenous origin. Some interesting data comes from the US Census Bureau which, for the first time in 2010 allowed for people identifying themselves as Hispanic/Latino/Spaniard to indicate whether or not they also belong to the indigenous community by selecting the “American Indian or Alaska Native” option and writing in their particular race – for example Maya, Nahua, Mixtec etc. Of the 50,477,594 Hispanic respondents, 1,190,904 indicated that they were of Native American origin, either alone or in combination with another racial indicator (white, black, etc.) This number is likely higher in actuality, because people may not have responded either to the question or to the Census in its entirety. Regardless, the conclusion can be drawn that since many Latin American immigrants who arrive in the United States are poor and many of them of indigenous origin, that many of them have not had access to a quality education.

Literacy, numeracy and basic education in the Latin American context has recently been taken up by several scholars from the region and is often viewed in a way that not only defines literacy, but also looks beyond those definitions to figure out how illiteracy became a problem in the first place. These scholars seek to not only define literacy in the Latin American context, but also to understand and explain the societal factors which seem to have illiteracy

“built-in” to their communities. Marinho and Carvalho point out that many definitions of the word literacy come from the developed world and have been derived in a context quite different from that of Latin America:

Presumindo que toda a população foi alfabetizada, já que a escolaridade é *realmente* obrigatória e *realmente* universal, esses países se interessam por avaliar os níveis de letramento da população, os usos, as práticas sociais de leitura e de escrita, e não os índices de alfabetização(14).

Martinho and Carvalho stress that in the developed world, education really is obligatory and universal and therefore can focus on levels, uses and social practices of literacy, instead of having to pay attention to literacy rates in their country. This is not the case in many underdeveloped nations. In some cases, such as in Mexico, education is actually required by law but not enforced. Oftentimes families cannot afford to send their children to school and must send them to work in order to help the family meet their basic needs, and there is no follow-through from the government to enforce mandatory education.

Even if a family is able to send their children to school (at the very least, through primary school) there are several other problems within the school systems themselves that cause disparities in literacy and other basic skills in comparison to those of developed nations. A study conducted by Rand

Education (2005) draws a comparison between the Mexican education system and the educational system in the United States, and identifies some key issues in the Mexican system that leave it behind the (albeit imperfect) system in the United States:

Key issues in Mexican education have to do with insufficient enrollments and high dropout rates beyond the primary level, insufficient supply of upper secondary schools (particularly in rural areas), and low student achievement levels. At the national and state levels, problematic issues include teacher training and a lack of research and evaluation that can inform school improvement efforts (8).

Many of these same issues are present in other Latin American countries, although it is valuable to examine a particularly well-known effort to reduce illiteracy that took place in Nicaragua under the Sandinista regime. The movement was called the National Literacy Movement and claims to have reduced illiteracy by 37.4% (from 50.3% to 12.9%) in the five short months it existed. Perhaps more important to note was the reason for implementing the program in the first place. The Sandinista regime began this program only 8 months after their victory, and saw literacy as an important component of national development (Haneman 2). The two primary reasons given for their

literacy initiative were “firstly, justice and a moral obligation of the revolution towards the population; and secondly, literacy was seen as a part of the preparation of the whole population to manage the big task of national reconstruction (Haneman 2)”. Despite these efforts by the Sandinista government (and several governments that have followed) Nicaragua does not currently stand out in Latin America as a higher-achieving country.

Although the schools in Mexico and other Latin American countries are not considered up-to-par with schools in the developed world, Martinho & Carvalho reiterate that first-world nations such as the United States still must deal with illiteracy, especially considering immigrant populations:

No entanto, essa hipótese não descarta o fato de que também os países do primeiro mundo lidam com o problema do analfabetismo, principalmente quando se considera a população de imigrantes analfabetos e os procesos de produção do analfabetismo funcional (14).

While it is true that there is a large education gap between many of the immigrant populations in the first world, one must wonder the extent to which these nations are truly aware of the extent of the problem. As previously mentioned, the word *literacy* is often used in reference to the bilingual ability (or lack thereof) of a person. However, many people do not realize that many of

these immigrants simply have not had the same opportunities in their home countries.

Gregorio Hernandez-Zamora is an accomplished author and professor who has overcome the tribulations of being born into a marginalized community in Mexico. In his book *Decolonizing Literacy: Mexican Lives in the Era of Global Capitalism*, Hernandez-Zamora goes beyond explaining education disparities as a simple result of economic differences and failed government policies; he asserts that the problems run much deeper. According to Hernandez-Zamora,

“Poor literacy and school failure are not individual phenomena in the ex-colonial world, but rather the historical and pervasive result of invasions, slavery and modern ‘development policies’ that, like social winds, respectively push forward or inhibit learning and growth possibilities (3).”

He goes on to detail how illiteracy is cast upon marginalized communities by dominant cultures. For example, he references European literacy in the context of Mexico as “instruments of conquest and colonization, economic deprivation, and cultural assimilation (7)”. Hernandez-Zamora then asserts that the same technocracies that destroyed lives and educational opportunities of the Mexican people were then used to decree that “what their victims need is not full access to

education and voice, citizenship and work, but 'skills for life and work', 'better reading habits' or 'digital literacy'(7)." As a result, current education policies in Mexico are still based on these very simplistic notions and in turn prevent people from achieving their full potential:

"In practice, these programs socialize 'human resources' to expect limited occupational options, acquire subservient behaviors, and to adopt an attitude of flexibility towards frequent changes of a job or even permanent joblessness. They overlook the deprived socioeconomic conditions in which individual lives are based, which hinder in fact their very *desires* and *possibilities* for intellectual, literacy and social growth (7)."

Hernandez-Zamora reiterates that these same systemic patterns are found in the Mexican ghettos across the United States, suggesting that the situation does not necessarily improve by simply immigrating to a developing country.

Another important aspect of Hernandez-Zamora's book is the affirmation that the stories of individual people are very important. The author states that many literacy programs and policies have been implemented based on sheer numbers of "illiterate" people in the general population. In Mexico, this number climbs well into the millions. He then asks the question "What can we do with millions *but* count them?" and affirms that the "peculiarities of individuals to

trace their complex interactions with one another and their environment(21)" in order to truly understand the aspects of their personal experiences that are otherwise invisible. The following section of this paper tell the stories of 5 adults in a local literacy class with the intention of understanding their motivations for being there and making sure their stories are heard.

Given the wide array of issues associated with being unable to read or write, in addition to the challenges that come with immigrating to another country, it is of utmost importance to understand on a deeper level why adult immigrants decide to start learning at this stage in their lives. Abadzi (1994) and Smith (2007) cite a desire to read and write letters to friends and family, to help one's children succeed in school, to obtain a higher paying job and simply furthering one's education as primary reasons that an adult may decide to learn to read so late in life. Additionally, Abadzi (17) lists gaining social prestige, avoiding deception by checking calculations and reading contracts, strengthening self-confidence, acquiring knowledge about social rights/duties, gaining influence in personal/social lives, teaching others, and improving one's living conditions as other potential motivating factors. This paper aims to shed light on this very question: why do these adults decide to start or continue their education at this stage in their lives?

Given that the Hispanic population is the largest immigrant demographic in the country, this paper focuses on them. It is imperative to touch on the history of the Hispanic population in the United States and examine how and why they came. It is also necessary to understand the situations (political, economic and especially educational) they faced in their home countries. Understanding these histories enhance our understanding of their motivations and expectations, allow us to better measure the outcomes of these expectations, and work toward better solutions to improve their quality of life.

CHAPTER II

VOICES

Methodology

The interviews included here were conducted over a period of approximately 3 weeks in a local non-profit organization in Central Texas. I already had a well-established relationship with the staff and several students following a service-learning assignment I carried out at the foundation in 2012. For a total of four hours per week during my appointment, I had the opportunity to spend time in the classroom with an incredible group of students who wound up teaching and inspiring me more than I probably did them. Roughly half of the interviewees were students I had already met during my volunteer appointment; the other half were students I had never met.

In order to earn the trust of and gain rapport with the students who did not know me, I first wrote a letter in Spanish which explained my project and advised that I would love the opportunity to speak with them about their experiences. I assured them that their identity would be protected. The educational director of the organization read the letter aloud in each class and made a copy for each of the students so they could practice reading it themselves. After the letter was distributed, I began attending classes and interviewing students who had already gotten to know me in the prior year.

When they became comfortable, I began to interview the students who hadn't met me before.

The literacy/basic education classes at the foundation employ a free curriculum designed by the *Instituto Nacional de Educación para Adultos* (the National Institute for the Education of Adults) or INEA, which is a facet of the government of Mexico. The program, *Plazas Comunitarias*, is a self-paced curriculum designed for Spanish-speaking students who have not completed a basic education in their home countries. When students enter the program, they take a placement test to determine in which level they should begin; if the student cannot read or write, they start from the very beginning of the curriculum. The government of Mexico certifies the passing grades of units completed by Mexican nationals. The primary goal is for each student to be successful in taking the GED in Spanish in the United States.

Given the nature of the curriculum, each class at this particular foundation is arranged so that each student works individually, but has access to teachers for assistance. My interviewees would simply step away from class with me when they were ready, and interviews were conducted in a separate room.

Once in the room, the student was reminded of the goal of the project and the reasons for which they were being asked to conduct an interview. I explained my interest in their individual stories – particularly with regard to

their education (or lack thereof); their family situation; why they decided to begin/continue their education in the states as an adult; and how their lives have changed (or how they expect them to change) as a result of their decision. I also assured them again that complete anonymity would be maintained, and that if there were a question they did not feel comfortable answering, it was not necessary to do so.

The primary questionnaire (Appendix A) contains 30 questions in Spanish. (Appendix B shows the questionnaire in English). Depending on the flow of the interview, some questions were either added or left out. In general, the interviews touched on 4 main areas: introduction questions that deal largely with the student's origin and journey to the US; personal questions, referring specifically with the student's personal journey with education, both as a young child and now as an adult in the US; family questions, designed to gauge the extent to which a student's family may be educated, and what the familial attitudes toward education are; and finally, program questions that examine each person's experience with the foundation and the curriculum, and how their lives may have been affected thus far. I believe it is important to understand one's past and present to make sense of the trajectory (or perceived trajectory) of the individual. For example, if a student has not grown up in a family that placed a high value on education, it would be to his or her benefit for the

school/organization to spend time helping the student understand the importance of learning. A student with motivation is more likely to be successful than a student without it.

In the next section, the stories of 5 of these students are shared in detail. They have been translated into English, and each of the students' names has been changed to protect his or her identity. Much of the information is summarized; however, when deemed necessary, a verbatim translation is provided.

Jorge

Jorge, originally from the state of Guanajuato in Mexico, is in his mid-40s. He has been in the United States for approximately 14 years, and has resided in Texas the entire time. He is the youngest of 7 children, 4 of whom still reside in Mexico. Here in Texas, he lives with his wife and his two young children and considers himself to be the head of his household in spite of the fact that he was injured in an on-the-job accident that caused him to lose total function of his right hand and arm.

Jorge is a very timid man; he does not give much detail when answering questions, and does not display much emotion. Regardless of his apparent lack of emotion, his responses to my questions paint a bittersweet picture of where he comes from and where he sees himself in society today.

After talking about Jorge's basic demographic information, we moved on to some questions about his childhood, his familial perceptions of education, and his personal educational experience (or lack thereof). When I asked him to talk to me about the Mexican education system, I was surprised to hear him tell me that education is definitely compulsory today, but that he didn't think it was when he was younger because he did not go. As a matter of fact, compulsory education has existed in Mexican lands since before the Aztecs were colonized by the Spaniards (Aztec Inventions, 2003), but is rarely enforced, if at all.

When I asked him about his family's perception of education, he shared with me that, although education was important to his family, they did not have enough money to send him to school. As it were, they barely had enough money to feed themselves. As a result, Jorge started working with them in the country as soon as he was old enough to do so.

By the time he arrived in the States, Jorge had not been able to complete any formal basic education, but shared with me that he could pick out a few words while reading and that he knew how to write a little bit (words such as his name and a few numbers). He also said that as a result of his work accident, he had to retrain himself to write his name with his non-dominant hand. I asked him whether his siblings could read and write, and he told me that they are not any more able to read and write than he was before starting classes at the

foundation. His wife, on the other hand, was able to complete secondary school in Mexico and is able to read and write at a “high level.”

I was curious to know how he found out about this program, given that reading print ads is not something he does on a daily basis. Jorge told me that a friend of his talked to him about going to school after his accident gave him the information about this particular organization. He has been attending classes for approximately 1 year, and comes twice per week. Jorge’s face lit up with pride when he added that he hardly ever misses class. In his opinion, the organization is very convenient for him – the morning classes allow him to study while his wife is at work and his children are at school. His experience thus far has been nothing but a positive one – Jorge told me that he is thankful for the opportunities that the organization provides. In addition to basic education classes, it offers ESL, financial literacy and computer literacy classes. Also, it houses a food pantry/clothing store as well as a free or no-cost dental clinic. I asked him if he would recommend it to other people, and he looked at me as though I were crazy for bothering to ask that question. “Yes,” he said. “I would recommend this program to anyone.”

When asked why he decided to start studying as an adult in the United States, Jorge simply responded with “Well... it was time. After my accident, I had the time to do it, and I really needed to.” When the question was subtly

reworded later in our conversation, Jorge expressed to me that he would like to get a job in which he can rely on his reading and writing, because he is unable to do much physical labor anymore. He also mentioned that he is feeling excited about where this education could lead him in his life. He then said one thing that is most important to him is to be able to help his children get ahead in life, and believes that learning to read and write will be a jumping-off point for him to do so.

We moved on to a different set of questions about whether or his new educational journey has had a positive impact on his life. The first answer out of his mouth before some additional prompting was simply “Definitely yes.” I asked him to elaborate a bit and to please give me an example of how it has helped him. His response was simple and beautiful: “Well, it has definitely helped me, especially in the streets. I know where I’m going now.”

Simon

Simon is originally from San Luis Potosí, Mexico. He has been in the United States for 19 years and has lived in Texas the entire time. Simon has 8 siblings, and is the middle child. All of his siblings except for one sister, and his father, live in the US. Here in Texas he resides with his wife. He considers himself to be the head of his household, although he cannot work very much due

to his failing health. Simon has just joined a church that he values deeply. He also attends weekly classes at the organization.

Simon was very emotional at several points during the interview, and answered my questions in a very candid and detailed fashion. Our interview lasted well over an hour and was by far the longest of all the interviews.

Almost immediately, it was clear that Simon has a complicated past, but was ready and willing to share some of it with me. When asked to describe the education system in his country, he shared that as a child he had been placed in a military academy. Soon after starting school, he began suffering from constant regular physical abuse.

Simon: “Well, they put me in a military school when I was young, but the intendant would hit me in the face with his whistle. I ran away from school a lot. It was supposed to be a place for me to learn, not to be hit in the face. I also got sexually abused by someone in the school, and even though my mother tried to help me through it herself, I really didn’t have anyone else to talk to. So when my mother would drop me off at school, I would run away.

I asked Simon how his mother felt about him not going to school, and he let me know that as long as he was helping to earn money (usually by begging in the street) she didn’t object too much. He explained that his father was absent from

his life because he had a second family with fewer children, and it was more financially feasible to maintain the smaller family. As such, Simon and his siblings were forced to help earn a living and he never had a chance to finish primary school.

During the next part of our conversation, Simon and I discussed why he wanted to learn to read and write now that he is an adult living in the US. His answer, though heartbreaking, is likely more common than many realize. Simon expressed that he needed to learn to read and write because he was tired of being questioned and laughed at when people found out he did not know how. He then opened up about his health issues, and exactly why reading and writing is important to him:

Simon: Sometimes when I go to the clinic and tell them I don't know how to read and write, they laugh at me, or they tell me "You have to learn to write your name on the paper" when they need me to sign something. They need my signature so they can treat me. They won't help me, and just tell me I need to bring a family member with me. And I'm sorry to say it, but I have HIV and I am embarrassed to bring my family. They don't know I have it, and I am embarrassed for them to find out.

Simon has now been studying with the organization for approximately one year, and tried to come twice a week to class. He states he did not know how to read at all and could barely write his name before he began taking the basic education course. He found out about the program through a social worker where he attends therapy sessions after he witnessed the murder of his best friend. Simon shared that his assigned social worker appeared apathetic toward his situation; he had just lost his friend, his financial assistance to pay rent and was struggling with day-to-day life. When he asked her where he could go to school to learn, she simply said there really wasn't a place in town that could help him. Luckily, another social worker who works directly with another student at the organization overheard the conversation and told Simon about this program. The same day, he arrived at the organization and enrolled into classes immediately.

I then asked about his family; Simon told me his siblings do not know how to read and write at all either, but that his wife reads and writes at a basic level. Simon states that since starting at the organization he has progressed slowly, and said he believes that if more teachers were available to assist in the classrooms and that they offered classes more than twice per week he would be able to progress faster. However, he reiterated his gratitude to the program and the people in the organization for what he has been able to accomplish in the past year.

By this point in our conversation, Simon had become even more comfortable and willing to open up about his situation. When I then asked him what he planned to do with his new knowledge, he opened up even more.

The first thing Simon mentioned was that he looks forward to not being taken advantage of by loan sharks and other merchandise rental companies. He shared a story of a time when he had gone with his wife to purchase a piece of furniture at a local home furnishing store. They found the exact table they had wanted, and were made to believe they were signing a paper that would allow them to make monthly installment payments on the table until it was paid in full. After a few months passed, Simon and his wife noticed that their balance due was not changing, even though they'd been paying more than the monthly billed amount. When they called to inquire, they were advised that they were not paying down a balance on the table; they were simply renting it. Simon says that although they had paid more than was charged, they never got their money back.

Already feeling sad and frustrated for Simon, I could not have imagined the story he told me next. He opened up about the day his friend was murdered. He, his wife and his best friend were out walking on the northeast side of the city when an unknown man gunned them down. In tears, Simon shared that the man shot his friend point blank in the face. His friend fell to the ground and bled to

death in front of Simon and his wife; however, they felt they could not call the cops for fear of what may happen to them given their lack of status in the country. Simon felt helpless in that moment and still wrestles with overwhelming guilt and sadness over a situation he could not control.

Simon: The real reason I wanted to learn to read and write is so that someday, I can write a letter to my friend and apologize. I want to apologize that I could not do anything to save him. I want to let him know how much I loved him.

Simon and I sat in silence for what seemed like an eternity. There wasn't much I could say in the moment. This tragic event occurred just over one year ago, and is still very fresh in his mind. Eventually, I assured him that he will soon be able to write this letter to his friend, and to stick with the program and continue working hard. He agreed, and continued by saying he has a brother in prison that he would like to be able to communicate with, as well as several friends still in Mexico he'd like to be able to communicate with via email. Simon noted that this program has been a progressive force in his life, and that he has noticed a positive impact on his life already in the short time he has attended classes.

Our interview seemed to be drawing to a close and I asked Simon if there was anything else he would like to share with me about his experience here. He responded with a high-level explanation of his experience here in the States:

Simon: Well... when I first got here, good things happened to me. Now I am having... well, I never thought I would lose my job, but I did, and now I understand that everything good comes to an end. I used to have money here. It wasn't because I was mooching off of other people. I was just working hard and living well. But after a while, things started happening that I never expected. My social worker failed me. I had gotten my papers together to amend my migratory status, but my social worker did not come through for me. I was receiving financial assistance to help pay my rent, and they took it away from me. So for a while I have been really depressed because she really failed me. And she knew it. So, I feel bad, but oh well. I think everything will be okay. It will be okay. We are going to be fine, and we'll get through this. The teachers here at this organization the teachers really, truly have helped me. The man, I don't know his name, but the man that is here now has helped me so much. He really has opened my eyes. And the director is a beautiful person – she really cares about us. Every once in a while she calls us, to let us know that classes have started up and reminding us to show up. I feel better here. I feel good.

Simon then thought for a second before expressing how he feels reading and writing will help him as a person. He said he feels that knowing how to read and write will make him better. According to Simon,

“Since I don’t know how to read and write, I just say whatever comes to mind. The words just fall out of my mouth and I say a lot of garbage. When I finally learn, I will be a better person...with words *and* letters. I can finally advance myself and I won’t always be stuck in the same place. I will be better.”

Isabel

Isabel is a 40-year old woman originally from Guanajuato, Mexico. She is the youngest of 9 girls. She has been in the United States for approximately 8 years and has spent the entire time in central Texas. She belongs to a church in town and lives with her husband and young son. Isabel considers herself to be the head of her household. She is a soft-spoken woman, but was ready and willing to answer my questions. Following our initial discussion about her demographics, we moved on to talk about her personal educational history, familial attitudes about education as well as Isabel’s perception of the Mexican education system.

Isabel shared that she believes the Mexican public education system to be “very poor.” According to her, many students do not even make it to

kindergarten, but that “nobody cares.” She acknowledged that in the US the situation is very different – Isabel said that her mother-in-law got into trouble because one of her children stopped going to school before she was legally allowed to drop out. “This doesn’t happen in Mexico,” she stated. In her case, Isabel only finished primary school. In secondary/middle school, families must start paying for books and other related school materials which Isabel explained that her parents could not afford for 9 children. Though she says education was important to them, they could not overcome the financial distress of maintaining their family in order to be able to allow their girls to continue through school.

Now that Isabel is an adult and living in the United States, her situation has changed quite a bit. She married a man who has been to school and is able to read and write “very well”, according to her. He wanted her to start taking classes as soon as they arrived in the US, but Isabel says “I didn’t want to, because I was pregnant. This would not be normal in Mexico, so I thought it would be strange here, too. I told him ‘How am I supposed to start going to school now? I’m not a school person anymore.’ Isabel knew how to read and write a little when she arrived, and said she thought that was good enough. Then, her young son started school.

Isabel: Well, I finally decided to start studying here for my son. My son just started school. He already knows more than I do!

Sometimes he will bring me his homework, which is in English,
and I just do not know what to tell him. So, I am here for him”

She has now been with the organization for approximately 8 months. She found out about it from another organization that offered ESL classes, but not any type of basic education assistance. Isabel found that learning English without a more solid grasp on basic literacy skills was difficult, and she was directed to the program at which she is studying now. When she first arrived, she mentioned, she was really afraid to ask any questions at all. As she watched the teachers, however, she came to realize that the teachers had a lot of patience with the students and did not make anyone feel bad for asking questions. Although she wishes there were more teachers available in the classroom, as a result of her hard work and motivation Isabel has been able to make a lot of progress in the short time she has been enrolled. She just needs to complete one math unit and a couple of Spanish language units and she will be officially finished and certified with a middle school education in Mexico.

I then asked her how she feels her life is different as a result of what she has learned thus far.

Isabel: Yes. Before, I felt like... every time my son would come home with homework it would be even more advanced than the last time, so sometimes I didn't even understand what he was

saying to me. He would talk to me about ‘this country is next to this other country, and this one over here, and South America is over there’ and I just had no idea what he was talking about. And UGH the animals. ‘These animals are like this, right mom?’ and I would just have to tell him “I have no idea, son”. Now, though, sometimes he asks me questions that I can help him with, because I have learned them here. And this is good, because he is very curious. He never stops asking questions.

Asking about her future, I found out from Isabel that in addition to her selflessness as a mother, she has plans for herself as well. She plans to continue taking classes at this organization in preparation for the GED. She also plans to start taking English classes within the same organization, because she says that her son speaks it fluently and she can’t communicate with him as well as she’d like to. Lastly, Isabel has plans to advance in the workforce so she can move upward and forward. “My husband and I... we just want to find better jobs. At least some decent ones. The jobs we have now... they are not good. They are really bad. We just want to get ahead, you know?”

Saul

Saul’s interview was quite long, perhaps only slightly shorter than that of Simon. Saul is in his mid-50s and is originally from a tiny *pueblo* in Mexico

“where you can count the number of houses on one hand” according to him. He is the middle child of 7 total, and has been living in the United State for approximately 15 years, all of which he has spent in Texas.

Saul had a very difficult time staying connected to the questions and had the tendency to veer off-topic for minutes at a time. He did not always make eye contact; and although this quite possibly was the result of being nervous I reminded myself that within this demographic, many learning/social/audio processing disorders go undiagnosed given the lack of available resources. At any rate, though we were not able to touch on all the questions due to a time constraint with the class schedule, we finished what we could of the interview and Saul shared some very profound thoughts with me.

When we talked about his own educational history and his perception of the Mexican public education system, he was very matter-of-fact with me: “Well, I don’t really have much to tell you about the education system in Mexico because I didn’t go”. Saul grew up in a very tiny town and, for financial reasons, was forced to go to work instead of go to school so that he could help his family maintain themselves. When he was just a young boy, his father left for Mexico City and Saul had to pick up the slack.

Eventually, Saul’s father came back to the *pueblo* and took him and his siblings to Mexico City, where (according to Saul) “In the city, the only thing you

can really do is beg for money in the street...so I didn't go to school there, either". Until beginning his academic journey in Texas, Saul had completed 1 year of primary school. He finds himself still impressed by the teacher he had for that one year, however. According to Saul, the teacher was very strict with his students and made them work to maintain the school along with completing their regular studies. Saul expressed that he was inspired by how hardworking his teacher was, and that he was a good role model during the time when his father was absent from his life.

Saul's history with this organization is unique. He knew how to read and write at a very basic level when he arrived in the States. His wife and two children also know how to read and write. After hearing about the organization on the radio, he began with an English class in 2008 and took level 1 twice. He took level 2 in the spring of 2010 along with two computer classes. Finally, he began his basic education classes in the summer of 2010. He comes twice per week when he can, and advised me that at times work gets in the way. For that reason, he wishes there were a more open and flexible class schedule to better accommodate those busy times.

When asked why he decided to start the basic education program, he gave an interesting answer. He wanted to start his basic education over in Spanish so he could better understand how verbs worked.

Saul: Well, I really wanted to understand grammar better; particularly verbs. Sometimes I would be reading, and I just didn't know what to do about the verbs. I wasn't getting anywhere in English class because I didn't understand basic stuff like verbs. It is a simple answer. The story is clear, isn't it?

His response was quite thought-provoking, and I imagined how difficult learning Spanish may have been had without a solid foundation in the English language – something I hadn't thought too much about.

We moved on to a conversation about how his studies at the organization have helped him in his daily life. His answer was inspiring:

Saul: Well, it has helped me a bit. I have learned to depend on myself more. If someone teaches you something, it is up to you to put it into practice so you don't forget it. You HAVE to practice it. For example if you work in a place with only Spanish-speaking people, you won't ever be able to practice English. So what do you do? You have to change jobs. You must push yourself if you want to learn.

Saul believes that this education will continue to help him in the future, but he has a hard time imagining exactly how.

Juan

Juan is from Cuernavaca, Mexico. He is in his late 20s and is the second-youngest of 9 children. He lives alone and considers himself the head of his household. He has been in the United States for 14 years, and has been in Texas the entire time.

The next portion of our conversation centered on Juan's educational background, his perception of the Mexican public education system, as well as the general attitude of his family about education. According to Juan, the education system in Mexico is drastically different to that of the US because

“Here, it is obligatory. In Mexico, it is not. In Mexico, you can never go to school and it is fine. In fact, the fewer that go is probably better. Here, though, if parents don't send their children to school they can take them to jail! It is definitely different here.”

Juan did not have the opportunity to go to school while in Mexico. His father passed away when he was a young child, and in his words, his family “fell apart”. He wound up on the streets, travelling from here to there, trying to work so he could feed himself.

When I talked to Juan about how his family perceived the importance of education, he answered my question from his own perspective, which lines up with the fact that he spent much of his youth alone.

Juan: Well, when you're young, you don't always think it is important. You don't know that it is important to study. So, I was like 'ugh, I'm not going to go to school. It is boring!' but when you get older, you realize how much time you wasted and that you should have gone to school. Even if you could only finish primary school, you should have gone. Not just to get a good job, but so you know enough basic information to survive."

Juan expressed to me that he decided to start studying in this program because he is ready now. Now that he is older, he understands that an education can open many doors for him in his life, and for his personal goals studying is something he really needs to do.

He has now been with this organization for around a year and a half, and attends classes twice per week. He did not know how to read nor write when he began. He found out about the program from Simon, whose story appears earlier in this section. Juan's main wish for the program is that they offered classes on more days of the week because he believes coming more consistently would help him even more than it already has. When asked if he felt that what he has learned thus far has helped him, and with a big smile he let me know:

"My personal life now is all computers and telephones, you know what I mean? Now, I am able to send a text message! I am able to

be sending text messages, and I can read what people send to me, even if it is difficult sometimes. I can even respond to their messages! I can read signs now, and sales in the grocery stores, and sometimes I just think 'WOW'. I feel as though I had been mute. I didn't know how to speak. Now I know how to speak. I can talk about a lot of things. I can do a lot more things now."

Juan went on to talk about how he believes that with an education, a person can go as far as they want to go in their lives and not have to depend on other people for one's own wellbeing. He referenced a time when he was a victim of racial profiling in a grocery store. A cashier told him that she knew he wasn't from here and that his ID must be fake. She refused to do business with him, and Juan expressed regret that he was unable to fight for himself in that situation.

"So, what I want is just to not have to depend on anyone. You know what I mean? I want to say 'I can speak English too. I can! I am not here, but you know, I still speak English'"

I was moved the most, perhaps, by Juan's answer to my question about what he plans to do with this new knowledge in the future. His goal? To help others learn, too.

"I mean, I want to progress more in life. I want to move forward, for sure. I want to learn to read and write in English. That is

important. People can't believe I've been here so long and don't read and write in English. Know what I mean? A lot of people feel so humiliated because they can't read and write in Spanish or English. So, I think that when I finally can read and write well, I want to try and help others do the same. I will have a different perspective, and I think I can really help them, because I will be able to tell them 'I've been where you are. I started out just like you did, and look where I am now'.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

The goal of this project was to shed light on a topic that is seldom investigated – motivating factors of an adult who decides to start or continue their basic education at a later stage in life. Specifically, this paper focuses on Spanish-speaking adults, a demographic that is frequently overlooked. What I found was that the reasons given by the interviewees did not differ from the reasons mentioned by Abadzi (1994) and Smith (2007). The adult students who were interviewed cited being able to write letters to friends and family, helping their children in school, “getting ahead” financially, not being deceived by financial contracts, increasing self-confidence and independence, and teaching others as their primary motivations for learning to read and write. Though the sample size was small, the original assumption that the reasons of this demographic might be different

The interview questions presented to my participants focused not only on their goals/motivations for starting a basic education program, but also examined the reasons for which they stopped studying in the first place. Understanding where these people are coming from and how they want to use this knowledge is imperative to creating programs that truly cater to what the student wants. As several of the authors mentioned in the first chapter discuss, education and

literacy are often “prescribed” to underprivileged communities by dominant groups. Asking students what they want in an education is the very first step in being able to provide them what they need. Being familiar with their past and the reasons for which the students had to drop out of school in the first place are of utmost importance as well; it can help ensure that the student is successful the second time.

Although the reasons given by the people in these case studies did not differ from the general reasons listed earlier, it is important to look beyond the reasons alone. Much like citing statistics in literacy conversations, generalizing reasons for why people may want to learn to read and write (or do anything, for that matter) begs the question “so what?” Statistics and other generalizations certainly have a place in fields such as literacy; for example, if a person or an organization is designing a literacy program, knowing possible and/or probable characteristics of a demographic is very helpful when considering which aspects of a program might be most beneficial to the most people. That way, they are able to market their class or curriculum in a way that will appeal to the greatest number of potential students.

Once those students walk through the door, however, the benefit of simply being familiar with statistics and other probabilities decreases significantly. Identifying students by statistics alone will not be sufficient to

foster an environment of probable success. In any classroom – in public schools, private schools, universities, non-profit organizations, etc. – students need to feel safe and connected. They need to feel important. In an environment like the one at this organization, allowing each student to share their personal story can help create a situation where the student feels both important and connected. This is an imperative step toward ensuring that the student doesn't just enroll in the class; it will help make certain that they continue to come to class. During his interview, Simon mentioned that he feels good here because he knows that the teachers and the educational director really care about him.

In addition to feeling important and connected, allowing students to share their stories can help the teachers and program administrators tailor the curriculum (as best they can) to each student to guarantee maximum results as they relate to each student's goals. Let us consider Isabel's story for a moment. During her interview, she mentioned feeling helpless when it came to helping her son with his homework. Specifically, she mentioned having had a difficult time with geography and animals. Once she grasps basic reading and writing, a teacher could conceivably provide supplemental reading materials for her that relate to geography and life science. Isabel would be able to practice her newly acquired skill while arming herself with information that would allow her to help her son with his homework that had previously given her some trouble.

Isabel also mentioned a desire to be able to communicate better with her son who speaks fluent English. Understanding that she has a desire to eventually learn English can empower the staff members to provide her with knowledge and resources that give her the best chance at successfully studying English.

In Simon's case, he wants to be able to write a letter to a friend. On the surface, this matches exactly the short list of reasons for wanting to read and write as stated by Smith (2007) and Abadzi (1994). Getting to know the story behind why he wants to write to his friend, however, is truly an eye-opening experience. Knowing exactly why he wants to write a letter to this friend can really help the educators or program directors ensure his success in doing so while being sensitive to his emotional trauma. The same can be said for the information he shared about his health condition. Having this information about Simon can help the staff be prepared to provide additional assistance (such as therapy) if equipped to do so, or refer him to a place that can provide those services to him.

Jorge was less specific when outlining his reasons and goals for wanting to learn to read and write, but he did mention helping his children get ahead and possibly getting a different job as two of his primary goals. Understanding this about Jorge could mean that a teacher or program director help him communicate better with his children's teachers to better understand what they

are working on in school; maybe he could be given supplemental homework that could help him prepare for reading and writing as it relates to a specific field of work. Recognizing Jorge's intentions can help create a better chance of success for him in a given program.

Quite possibly one of the most important reasons to identify a student's goals would be to help a person like Saul. During his interview, it came out that he is not completely sure what he wants to do with his education. He seems to know intuitively that going to school will help him, but is not sure how. If a student feels lost or uncertain, it is imperative that the teacher(s) steps in to make sure the lines of communication are open. This will help students like Saul define their goals, rather than simply giving up. Knowing students on an individual level can help all educators provide an environment for success. In the case of these students, they likely have never experienced that before.

Several other things struck me during these interviews, the first of which is the general perception of the education system in their home country. Each of these students is from Mexico, which happened by chance but is representative of the geographic region in which we live. Each of these students indicated that they believe education in Mexico is not mandatory. This could not be further from the truth. Education through secondary school is compulsory in Mexico; however, these laws are not enforced. In choosing to focus on other issues, the

government of Mexico is effectively choosing to leave masses of people behind, just as Gregorio Hernandez-Zamora asserted. These people are held so far from the “norm” that they may not even realize they are being left behind. Juan mentioned in his interview that students in Mexico are “not required” to attend school, and that “the fewer that go, the better”. Clearly, not everybody is in the dark about the situation but few are not empowered enough to fight for better circumstances.

Being able to read and write can empower people to stand up for themselves. In an interview with another student that was not detailed in this paper, a woman (Teresa) shared with me that her house had been broken into several months prior to starting classes at this foundation. She had to call her daughter to help her call the police. Months later, Teresa was home alone one night and heard someone attempting to break in again. This time, however, she had been taking classes for several weeks and knew the letters of the Spanish alphabet. Her daughter had made a list of emergency contact numbers, and she was able to find the letters **p** and **o** next to one another, and was able to sound out *policía* and contact the police on her own. Because Teresa had attained even a small level of literacy, she was able to save time in an emergency and possibly even save her own life because she could call the police herself.

Another aspect of these interviews that caught my attention were some of the things that came out in a very “between the lines” fashion. For example, Simon spoke extensively about learning to read and write so he could become a better person. He wants to be able to speak more effectively. Intuitively, Simon understands that knowing how to read and write well can have a profound effect on the way a person speaks. He also knows that being able to read will help him write better. Juan mentioned that reading and writing opens doors – many doors – but did not stop to explain what he meant. He just seems to know that with a solid reading and writing foundation, the possibilities are endless.

Lastly, I was most moved by the positive attitudes exhibited by these students. Some of them have been through more trials and tribulations than most of us will see in a lifetime. Some of them are still struggling financially, medically, socially, emotionally, etc... but still come to class every week excited and motivated to learn. This is an important lesson for everyone, but should also serve as a motivator for organizations who provide services like basic education to screen their teachers as best they can to ensure the students will be met with equal enthusiasm.

The information listed in this paper is not exhaustive and only scratches the surface of this particular topic. Some possible areas for further research could be program design, and figuring out the best way to design a standard

curriculum that is also flexible enough to cater to the interests of each individual student. The curriculum used in the organization in which I conducted my interviews already does that, to an extent. Students are able to choose among several topics of study throughout the duration of the basic education curriculum.

One area of potential study that is of particular interest to me is how the curriculum, once designed, is delivered. In this program, students are given books and other hard copies of materials and work directly with teachers and other students in a classroom. However, several literacy programs also exist that are exclusively done via computer. A comparative study could be done to see which type of program is more efficient; is having a live person around to answer questions more effective, or would a student be more likely to try harder without feeling ashamed or embarrassed in the face of another person?

Another topic of study could possibly be working toward solutions with the Mexican government to ensure that more people have access to education, and that they enforce their “mandatory” education policy. Interestingly enough, the curriculum used in the organization here in central Texas was designed by the Mexican government specifically for Mexican people who have moved out of the country. How is it that they seem to be more concerned with the educational wellbeing of their people only after they’ve moved away?

Lastly, over a longer period of time, the effects of learning to read and write well could be measured. Knowing how reading and writing changes lives in the long-term could help people design programs that are even more effective from the very beginning.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS - SPANISH

Preguntas de introducción

¿Nació aquí o en otro país?

¿Es jefe/ama de su casa, o dependiente?

¿Cuánto tiempo tiene viviendo aquí en Texas?

¿Pertenece a alguna comunidad aquí? Por ejemplo, ¿asiste a una iglesia? ¿Vive cerca de otra gente de su país?

¿Cuánto tiempo tiene en EE.UU.?

¿Hay diferencias en las experiencias que ha tenido aquí y en el/los otros estado/s?

Preguntas personales

¿Cuántos hermanos tiene?

¿Usted es el/la mayor/menor?

Cuénteme un poco sobre la educación en su país. ¿Cómo es el sistema educativo allá?

En general, ¿qué es la actitud de su familia sobre la educación?

¿Tuvo la oportunidad de estudiar en algún momento?

¿Hasta qué nivel estudió?

¿Por qué dejó de estudiar?

¿Por qué decidió empezar/continuar su educación?

¿Cuánto tiempo tiene estudiando aquí en la organización?

¿Cuántas veces a la semana viene?

¿Sabía leer cuando empezó a estudiar aquí?

¿Sabía escribir cuando empezó a estudiar aquí?

¿Cree que le ha ayudado (o que le va a ayudar) leer y escribir? ¿Cómo?

Preguntas familiares

¿Tiene familia aquí?

¿Con quién/es vive?

¿Saben leer y/o escribir los otros miembros de su familia (los que viven aquí)?

Programa

¿Cómo se enteró de este programa?

¿Hay algo que se podría hacer para mejorar su experiencia personal con el programa? (i.e. más maestros, horarios diferentes, etc.)

¿Qué está haciendo o que espera hacer con lo que ha aprendido en la clase?

¿Cómo cree que esta educación le va a ayudar en su vida personal?

¿Recomendaría el programa a otras personas?

¿Qué se podría hacer para que más gente supiera que existe este programa?

¿Ya siente una diferencia en su vida por haber asistido al programa? ¿Cómo?

¿Hay algo más que le gustaría compartir conmigo sobre su experiencia aquí en la organización o sobre su experiencia en general aquí en Texas?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS - ENGLISH

Introduction questions

Were you born here, or in another country?

Are you the head of your household, or a dependent?

How long have you lived in Texas?

Do you belong to any particular communities here? For example, are you a member of a church? Do you live near other people from your home country?

How long have you been in the US?

Are there differences in the experiences you've had here versus in the other state/s?

Personal questions

How many siblings do you have?

Are you the oldest/youngest?

Tell me a bit about education in your home country. How is the education system there?

In general, what is your family's attitude about education?

Did you have the opportunity to go to school?

What level in school did you reach?

Why did you stop studying?

Why did you decide to begin/continue studying here?

How long have you been studying here in the organization?

How many times per week do you come to class?

Did you know how to read when you started studying here?

Did you know how to write when you started studying here?

Do you think learning to read and write has helped/will be beneficial to you?
How?

Family questions

Do you have family here?

With whom do you live?

Do the other members of your family (that live here) know how to read and write?

Program

How did you find out about this program?

Is there anything that could be done to improve your personal experience with the program? For example: more teachers, a different schedule, etc.

What are you doing or what do you hope to do with what you have learned in class?

How do you believe this education will benefit you in your personal life?

Would you recommend this program to others?

What could be done to ensure that more people find out about this program?

Have you noticed a difference in your life as a result of participating in this program? How?

Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about your experience in this program or your experience in Texas in general?

APPENDIX C: IRB EXEMPTION



Institutional Review Board

Request For Exemption

Certificate of Approval

Applicant: Allison Yakel

Request Number : EXP2013M2568

Date of Approval: 04/26/13

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "M. Blonds".

Assistant Vice President for Research
and Federal Relations

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jon Lane".

Chair, Institutional Review Board

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