

CHAPTER 2: SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

2.1. Research Design

The present study followed a qualitative research design based on ethnographic methods. This approach was chosen given that the purpose of the research was to describe and analyze part of the culture of a specific community, specifically “by identifying and describing the participants’ practices and beliefs” (Gay & Airasian, 2002). In other words, the project was carried out in a natural setting, mainly through observations and interviews, to permit an understanding of local perspectives and behaviors toward literacy and literacy instruction.

Indeed, Erickson (1986) suggests that the field of education provides many opportunities for this type of investigation. As opposed to quantitative studies, qualitative research, in particular the ethnographic method, is often conducted to frame human culture and ideologies, represented and transmitted in educational settings, within a socio-political and historical context. Such techniques were ideal for the project at hand, which examined the attitudes and practices of teachers, parents, and students in a specific community in central Mexico.

As described in detail in the next chapter, data collection was based on multiple sources (i.e. observations, interviews, document analysis), and such triangulation allowed for an understanding of the anticipated complexity of the proposed research context. This strategy reduced the chances of establishing inaccurate assumptions, results, and implications, often the case with this type of research. The use of three different data collection techniques permitted not only a greater depth of understanding of the practices and ideologies of interest, but also more valid findings.

The data were obtained over the course of seven months (September 2003 – March 2004) and were analyzed in accordance with the constant comparative method regularly employed in qualitative studies.

It is important to note that qualitative research does not intend to prove pre-formed hypotheses or theories. Rather, qualitative researchers typically spend extended amounts of time in the proposed setting before making assumptions, based on the data, which lead to hypotheses and often to theories. Therefore, this study derived from the three research questions outlined in chapter one, in an attempt to identify and describe local cultural ideologies, and not on set predictions to be proved or disproved.

Moreover, in qualitative investigations, an understanding of the context and participants evolves throughout the study, as the researcher becomes increasingly familiar with his/her environment. One of the main goals in this project was to learn as much as possible about the participants and also about the factors underlying their beliefs and practices. Seven months in the proposed context was thus necessary, especially considering the researcher's own distinct cultural and educational upbringing in the United States.

The final reason influencing the decision to carry out the study in this manner was that the investigation formed part of a larger research project, described in chapter one (Smith et al., 2002). The main objective of this larger study is to understand the processes and ideologies that contribute to the social construction of readers and writers in two elementary schools in central Mexico. Significantly, the research team of this project had already established at its conception the qualitative paradigm based on ethnographic methods outlined above. Given that the study proposed to add data and

findings to this larger investigation, it was crucial that the researcher follow a similar methodology, specifically with respect to data collection and analysis.

2.2. Context

2.2.1. Community

The data for this project was collected in a specific region of south central Mexico over a period of seven months. The elementary school chosen for research is located in a medium-sized city with a population of around 50,000 (Jiménez et al., 2003), whose history reaches back over 2,000 years. This town is situated near a larger city, the state capital and a major industrial and educational center with approximately 2 million inhabitants.

According to Smith et al. (2002), this area of central Mexico is considered an “expulsion zone”, given that many residents, especially men between the ages of 15 and 50, emigrate to the United States (particularly New Jersey/New York) in search for better employment opportunities. Some of these individuals, referred to in this study as “transnationals”, move back-and-forth between the two countries on a frequent basis.

The city is comprised of *barrios*, which, according to Mlade (2001: 20), consist of “groups of mostly inter-related families, the majority of whom reside in the same neighborhood, also referred to as a *barrio*, which are protected by and participate in the celebration of the same patron saint.” Clusters of these residential districts serve as the structure of the city as a whole. As a result of a denser population and the construction of houses, businesses, and streets, parcels of land and open fields have become increasingly scarce. Along the same lines, over the years the percentage of residents dedicating their

time to agricultural work has significantly diminished, at least inside city limits (Álvarez, Corro & Lorandi, 1992)

As far as education, 2000 census data indicates that 92 percent of the community is literate (95% of males, 90% of females). In 2000, 8076 (93%) children ages 5-11 were attending school (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, 2000). Nevertheless, Álvarez et al. (1992, cited in Mlade, 2001: 25) have claimed that “prestige in the community counted more than education as a contributing factor to economic level.” Mlade explains this point by arguing that connections (i.e. people one knows in positions of power/influence) can often be more useful than professional degrees and qualifications and that local residents are conscious of this fact.

This region is likewise home to a significant number of indigenous peoples, who often emigrate from southern states. Náhuatl speakers have a long history in this part of Mexico, and, indeed, the state in which the study was conducted is home to one of the highest concentrations of speakers of indigenous languages in the nation (Jiménez et al., 2003). The national census reports in this city a total of 2,143 Náhuatl speakers over the age of five, as well as a fewer number of individuals with a knowledge of Totonaco (102), Mazateco (23), Mixteco (17), and Zapoteco (15) (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, 2000).

2.2.2. School

2.2.2.1. Description

Before providing a description of the research site and participants, it seems necessary to explain to readers, especially non-Mexicans, how the Mexican school system is structured and organized. Levinson (2001: 6) offers a breakdown of the

available options. He points out that after the completion of six years (grades 1-6) of elementary school (*primaria*), students may opt to attend a regular middle school (*secundaria*), a technical middle school, or what is known as a *telesecundaria*, in which instruction is broadcast via television screens with the help of a teacher. This period of formal education typically lasts three years, grades 7-9. Subsequently, students who decide to continue their education may advance to a regular high school (*preparatoria*) or to a technical high school (grades 10-12), the last option existing for individuals who wish to specialize in an area such as computer technology or commerce.

Regarding tertiary education, Mexicans who graduate from high school may attend a teacher's college (*Normal Superior*), a university, or a technical institute (*Politécnico or Tecnológico*). Depending on the type of degree sought, this instruction can last anywhere from two to five years, usually at least four or five years for those pursuing a bachelor of arts (B.A.) or sciences (B.S.). Although the *Normal Superior* used to be a two-year degree, it is now four years. After the B.A. and B.S. degrees, known as *licenciaturas*, students may earn a master's (*maestría*) and/or Ph.D. (*doctorado*).

For the purposes of this study, a semi-private, elementary school was chosen for several reasons. First, as mentioned in chapter one, current research on literacy practices and instruction have been quite limited to contexts in the United States and Western Europe. Given that attempts have been made to generalize these findings to Latin America, specifically Mexico, it is important to recognize that the social nature of literacy (Barton, 1999) stipulates that reading and writing are best examined as practices dependent on social, cultural, and ideological factors. Accordingly, research in an actual

Mexican setting was hoped to contribute to the construction and revision of theories based on local data.

Second, this particular school was selected due to the fact that access to classrooms and school grounds had already been negotiated (see section 2.2.2.2). In fact, researchers participating in the larger study knew teachers and administrators at the school, had firsthand knowledge of the institution's beginning and approach to teaching (Jiménez et al., 2003), and had previously collected data in the form of classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis. Significantly, the present thesis extended and refined the findings of former studies carried out at the research site.

Third, as described in detail below, this semi-private institution is unusual in that the students represent a range of socio-economic statuses; that is, there is a combination of students from both the lower and middle classes of society. Public schools, in contrast, are populated mostly by children of the lower class. The former principal stated in earlier interviews (Jiménez et al., 2003: 494) that the school prided itself on its effort made to admit "students who had not been successful in public schools". However, school officials recently told the researcher that incoming students no longer had the opportunity to receive scholarships or reduced tuition, as in past years. Current tuition at the elementary level is *600 pesos*, around \$60 USD, per month, in contrast to public schools, which have no tuition fees. It is important to mention that both private and public schools in Mexico have many other hidden costs, such as money for uniforms, materials, and donations.

The school in which the data was collected, which has been given the pseudonym Centro Telpochcalli, states as its mission 'the search for social, psychological, and

educational alternatives enabling members of the nation's most disadvantaged population to become active agents of change and social transformation'. The institution was founded in 1985 and exists as a non-governmental, non-profit organization which promotes human, social, and economic development. It includes students from kindergarten through twelfth grade, with a present total of 358 (elementary school: 196; middle school: 116; high school: 46), as well as 30 teachers and administrators. What follows is an outline of the school's creation and history, adapted from a document produced at the school with the purpose of soliciting funds from foundations (Vázquez, 2003).

In 1985 local educators and researchers established a formal educational model whose objective was to maximize the potential of the student body in the Centro Telpochcalli. During this same year, these individuals, along with children and adults from the community, initiated the construction of sixteen classrooms, workshops for job training, offices, a computer lab, a library, in addition to a Community Development Center. Likewise, a curriculum was designed for pre-school, elementary, middle, and high-school grade levels, emphasizing social action, professional skills and abilities, and academic competitiveness. (Today there is no longer a pre-school at this institution.) In 1992 school affiliates published a book (Álvarez et al., 1992) and an article, entitled *Desarrollo y Evaluación del Proyecto Educativo Telpochcalli* [*Development and Evaluation of Telpochcalli's Educational Project*], both dealing with the socioeconomic needs of the local community as well as the school's commitment to the advancement of its students and the community.

Beginning in 1992, parents from 27 local preschools, elementary schools, and middle schools, including the Centro Telpochcalli, formed committees whose goal was to plan and construct educational facilities benefiting over 5,000 children from the local community. This association, which likewise gathered to examine the factors which inhibited or fostered community and parental participation in educational issues, was recognized both locally and nationally in 1995. During 1993-1994, the institution also organized two state conferences intended to promote human and social development, especially that of women.

By 1996, the school had begun implementing educational opportunities for 500 children and parents in a select part of the local community. Under past circumstances, this population had little access to formal education; therefore, the institution's project was designed to encourage individuals in their own communities to promote group participation and responsibility, thereby making them agents of change. These families were also provided with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and tools necessary to guide changes. These efforts were congratulated in 1999 by the governments of Mexico and Canada, based on the opportunities they offered children of an otherwise marginalized population.

Also in 1999, the educational model described above was tested in other communities within state boundaries, specifically in 19 indigenous communities (a total of over 2,000 children) including speakers of Totonaco, Náhuatl, and Popoloca. Seven of these communities were eventually chosen as settings in which to implement the new pedagogy based on social action. The aims of these programs included the following: a reduction of poverty; human, social, educational, economic, environmental, and cultural

development; democratic processes; intercultural values; peace; and, human rights. In recent years, the school has expanded its outreach projects to 14 rural communities, that is, to more than 3000 indigenous children and youth. According to the former principal, the institution hopes to reverse the unfortunate consequences of historical neglect and marginalization suffered by indigenous and rural populations. All of these programs are provided free-of-charge to the participants.

Currently, the institution puts forth eight objectives, as follows:

- 1) To avoid the loss of human potential in Mexico by participating in the national effort to fight against social marginalization and poverty
- 2) To contribute significantly to the reversal of social problems resulting from the lack of education of children, families, and communities of limited resources
- 3) To promote cultural, human, intellectual, economic, and social development through education and material resources
- 4) To design, implement, evaluate, and promote initiatives and programs which are crucial to the advancement of the aforementioned population
- 5) To develop educational alternatives permitting the population in question to overcome poverty and to increase its quality of life
- 6) To motivate and encourage community members to become actively involved in developmental projects
- 7) To guide, support, and promote unity, progress, and self-maintenance among community members

8) To train participants to obtain and manage financial resources, to develop productive activities leading to self-sustainability, and to facilitate the establishment of relationships with national and international organizations

Many of these goals are similar to those set by the Secretaría de Educación Pública [Department of Public Education] for public elementary schools in Mexico. For example, the SEP webpage mentions as its mission the “creation of conditions permitting and assuring that all Mexican have access to a quality education” (my translation). (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2003). It likewise claims to promote the “integral human development of the nation’s population”, as well as its “cultural, scientific, technological, economic, and social advancement”. Clearly, both entities state that they support the rights and opportunities of lower-class children to an education which will allow them to become successful members of society.

Recently, a team of researchers, including graduate students at the local university, administered a linguistic census (see Appendix B) to parents at the research site as part of a final course project in bilingualism. Of a total of 196 families from grade levels one through six (the elementary school), 58 parents responded to the questionnaire. Questions were designed to ascertain background information on the parents (i.e. age, sex, place of birth, current residence, grade level of child(ren), number of years the family’s children have attended the school, profession, number of persons living in home, access to utilities, type of property, and years of formal education) as well as knowledge of foreign languages, including which languages, proficiency in each language, domains of use, frequency of use, linguistic skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking), types of

texts read, and where each language was learned. Moreover, the questionnaires consisted of items concerning the perceived importance of a bilingual education, number and location of relatives living abroad, countries visited, whether the parent watched television and/or listened to music in English, reasons for choosing this particular school for their child(ren), and what they considered to be characteristics of a 'good education'.

The general findings of the linguistic census questionnaire revealed that almost half the respondents (48%) claimed to know no foreign language, while 46% reported some knowledge of English, 5% French or Italian, and 2% Náhuatl, Maya, or German. Of those who claimed to know a foreign language, most (90%) replied that their level of proficiency was either basic or intermediate. As far as linguistic skills, slightly more participants answered that they were able to read and write in the foreign language as opposed to speak or understand it. In other words, these self-reported data suggest that L2 literacy is somewhat more developed than oracy. All the respondents to the question regarding the importance of a bilingual education decided that knowledge of a second language was advantageous for their child(ren).

Following the general analysis mentioned above (i.e. all 58 questionnaires), the data were separated according to grade level, specifically first and fourth grades. The reason the responses of parents from these grade levels were isolated and analyzed independently was because the current study concentrated on literacy practices of children in first and fourth grades. Given that the knowledge of other languages can influence local literacy practices, processes, and ideologies (the topic of the project), it was interesting to discover the linguistic repertoire of these specific groups of parents.

Of a total of 58 parents who answered the questionnaire, twelve reported having a child in first grade. Twelve other parents claimed to have a son or daughter in fourth grade. Of the twelve first-grade parents, five reported knowledge of a foreign language: 4- English; 1- English and Náhuatl. On the other hand, only three of the twelve fourth-grade parents know another language: 2- English; 1- Italian. With respect to level of proficiency, the first-grade parents are fairly balanced between basic (2), intermediate (1), and advanced (2). Likewise, they are equally able to read, write, understand, and speak English, the most common foreign language. In contrast, all the fourth-grade parents evaluated their knowledge as basic. They also reported passive bilingualism, claiming that they were only able to read and understand the foreign languages. As stated above in the general analysis, all respondents revealed that a bilingual education was important for their child(ren).

With respect to socio-economic status (SES), the census study classified ten of the 58 respondents as 'low', thirty-five as 'middle', and the remaining thirteen as 'high'. These levels were determined on the basis of an evaluation of criteria such as profession, number of people living in the home, access to utilities (water, telephone, electricity, gas, Internet and car), as well as years of formal schooling and trips abroad.

In the low SES level, only one person reported knowledge of a second language, Maya. However, no further information was provided about that language (i.e. proficiency, linguistic skills). Of the 35 individuals categorized within the middle SES level, sixteen claimed to know a foreign language (English-14; Italian-2; French-1; Náhuatl-1) with either a basic or intermediate proficiency. Literacy was slightly higher than oracy for English. Surprisingly, only one individual mentioned knowledge of

Náhuatl, historically the most important local indigenous language. In the 'high' SES group, all respondents reported knowledge of a second language (English-12; French-2; German-1; Italian-1). As far as level of proficiency in English, four were basic, four intermediate, and three advanced. The other person left this item blank. Linguistic skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) were equally balanced for this last group.

The 58 participants in the linguistic census gave a variety of answers when asked why they chose the Centro Telpochcalli for their children. Thirteen mentioned the high level of academics at the school, and seven others commented on the effective teaching methods. Five respondents said that the primary basis for enrolling their children in this school was because of its proximity to their homes; likewise, most of the respondents reported that their children used means of public transportation to get to and from school. The remaining parents listed reasons as diverse as discipline, the instruction of societal values, critical thinking skills, respect, recommendations from friends and relatives, peer interaction, facilities, openness, smaller classes, and an affordable tuition.

2.2.2.2. Access

Given that this particular school had been one of the primary research sites for the larger study since 2002, it was anticipated that access for the present project would be unproblematic. Indeed, other researchers had already conducted observations and interviews with school officials and children in this institution, and had likewise donated books and given onsite, professional-development workshops. In this manner, a certain rapport and trust had been established between the researchers and the school.

Nevertheless, access was more delayed than expected, especially access to the first- and fourth-grade classrooms. Initially - around the middle of September - the

researcher was accompanied to the school by the director of the larger project with the aim of a formal introduction to school administrators. The first observations (primarily of the school grounds) were also carried out during these final weeks of September. These visits served to familiarize the researcher with the setting, although permission had yet to be obtained to enter the classrooms due to the elementary-school principal's stipulation that a formal introduction to the teachers would be a necessary prerequisite.

A few weeks later, after various failed attempts to organize meetings with the first- and fourth-grade teachers, on whose classes the study wished to concentrate, the principal finally arranged an afternoon meeting. The purpose of this 30-minute get-together was twofold. First, it was necessary for the researcher and project director to formally introduce themselves to the two teachers, and vice versa. Second, this time was taken to explain to the principal and teachers the goals and objectives of the project, as well as to obtain permission from both parties to perform observations in each of the teacher's classrooms once a week during a seven-month period. Once both teachers were informed of the researcher's intentions, they agreed to the observations and initial dates were set. Classroom visits began the next week (in early October).

In exchange for allowing the researcher access to the school grounds and the two classrooms, the thesis director gave the elementary school principal a written document (see Appendix A) promising to continue giving professional-development workshops at the school. The topic of these seminars would relate directly to literacy instruction. A copy of this document was likewise made for other administrative staff, including the founder of the school, who, at the request of the principal, should be completely informed of all the aspects of the project. The principal also made it clear on several occasions that

the founder of the school needed to read the original proposal of the larger study before classrooms observations could begin.

Another important outcome of the meeting was that the teachers and principal were assured that the names of the school and participants would remain anonymous. In other words, only the researchers and other members of the research team would have access to the data obtained during observations and interviews. In the thesis, as in any other publications using the findings from the school, information singling out this research site would be eliminated unless individual participants gave explicit approval to use their names. The parents, whom the researcher contacted in early December, were also guaranteed this confidentiality.

2.3. Participants

From October-February, observations took place in one first-grade classroom and one fourth-grade classroom (one hour weekly in each class) at this particular school. Beginning in mid-February, the number of observations in each classroom increased to two times per week, given that another member of the research team was assigned to fourth grade, while the researcher stayed in first grade.

First grade was selected due to the fact that it is at this level that children typically begin to learn to read. In other words, in first grade children are first exposed to academic literacy practices associated with formal schooling. According to the first-grade teacher, only 50% of her current students had attended pre-school. Fourth grade, on the other hand, is when the focus of instruction usually shifts to reading for the purpose of learning. Indeed, literacy activities are very prevalent at these levels of instruction in

Mexico, which yielded abundant data. In addition to these observations, six children, six parents, and the two teachers were interviewed mid-way through the project with the aim of gathering more in-depth perspectives on literacy and literacy instruction both in general and more specifically at the research site. The rest of this chapter is dedicated to a detailed description of all the researchers, teachers, students, and parents involved directly with this thesis.

2.3.1. Researchers

2.3.1.1. Larger Project

The principal investigators for the larger study are a professor from the local university (born in the United States), who has a Ph.D. in Education, and an associate professor of Language and Literacy at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who also holds a Ph.D. in Education. The second researcher, who received his B.A. in Mexico, has taught a qualitative research course as a visiting professor in the local university. Both are bilingual in English and Spanish. Likewise, there are presently two graduate students, as well as another researcher/professor, collecting and analyzing data in support of the larger project.

2.3.1.2. Primary Researcher

The author of this study was born and raised in the United States. He received his undergraduate degree with a double major in Spanish and linguistics. His experience with Mexico began during college, when he studied abroad in two different parts of the country as a foreign exchange student, once in the summer and later for an entire academic year. Currently he is completing a master's degree in applied linguistics in a bilingual program in central Mexico, having lived in the area for a year and a half. His

near-native proficiency in Spanish and firsthand knowledge of the country, including schooling, were crucial factors in the data collection process given that all the literacy classes, interviews, and documents were in Spanish and thus required both a written and oral command of the language.

2.3.2. Teachers

The first-grade teacher in this study, Gertrudis (pseudonym), was a Mexican female, age 27, with a (four-year) bachelor's degree in elementary education from a state teacher's college (*Escuela Normal*). After working at another local elementary school for half a year, she accepted employment at the research site, where she has now been a teacher in first grade for a total of three years. The fourth-grade Spanish teacher, Octavio (pseudonym), was a Mexican male, age 37, with a two-year associate's degree in elementary education from a state teacher's college. He has been teaching at the school for fourteen years, having previously worked during three years as an educator for the Secretaría de Educación Pública [Department of Public Education] in a nearby urban area. Importantly, Octavio's only contact with the fourth-grade students is during Spanish literacy instruction, given that he teaches sixth grade throughout the rest of the school day. Moreover, this is the first year he has taught in the elementary school, having spent the previous thirteen years teaching ninth-grade science at the middle school.

2.3.3. Students

2.3.3.1. Classrooms

As mentioned earlier, observations were conducted in two elementary-school Spanish classrooms: first and fourth grades. The subject of Spanish was selected because

Table 2.1 Participating Teachers

Name (Pseudonym)	Current Position	Age	Gender	Professional Degree	Total years of teaching experience	Years teaching at current location
Gertrudis	first-grade teacher	27	female	B.A. Elementary Education	3.5	3
Octavio	fourth-grade teacher	37	male	A.A. Elementary Education	17	14

school administrators commented that literacy activities would be most prevalent in these classes. The larger study (Smith et al., 2002; Jiménez et al., 2003) likewise decided to focus on Spanish classes at the two research sites (a public and a semi-private school) for the purpose of comparison and contrast.

There were a total of 28 first-graders and 19 fourth-graders. The number of students in the two classes is different because while the first-grade class is comprised of all the children at this level in the school, the fourth-graders have been divided into two groups due to the larger number of students of this age. The researcher worked with only one of these latter groups (both of which are taught by Octavio), which was chosen in October by the principal and teacher.

The classrooms themselves are very similar in physical layout, as seen in Figure 2.1 below. As illustrated, the two rooms include tables rather than individual desks. The tables are rectangular, wooden-topped, painted blue, and in good condition. The only difference is that the tables for the first-graders are much lower to the ground than those for the fourth-graders. There are three to four wooden chairs at each table. In both

Figure 2.1 First- and Fourth-Grade Classrooms

first grade

fourth grade



classrooms students are expected to work in collaboration with their classmates, especially in the first grade, where the teacher (Gertrudis) frequently instructs the children to work together on in-class assignments. The fourth-grade teacher, Octavio, likewise promotes cooperative learning, although many of the lessons in his Spanish class are largely teacher-centered. Each student owns a Spanish book, *libro de español*, which is provided free-of-charge by the Mexican government at the elementary level, and a notebook for writing, or *libreta*. The children are also asked to bring with them to class a set of colored pencils and, in fourth grade, a dictionary. These are the materials most commonly used during literacy instruction.

Each classroom contains a chalkboard, spanning most of the front of the room, large glass windows on two walls, and a bookshelf at the back. Above the chalkboard in the first-grade classroom the teacher has posted cut-out sheets of paper with the letters of the alphabet. In fourth grade in the same location there are two, teacher-produced posters, one consisting of the class rules, and the other one a quote about the importance of

learning. The students keep their Spanish textbooks (as well as books for the other subjects in first grade) on the bookshelves, which also hold a few dictionaries, and, in the case of fourth grade, three fish tanks and a large, model wooden boat. Both teachers have a desk for themselves at the back of the room, the fourth-grade teacher's (who seems to have personalized his classroom) much larger than that of the first-grade teacher.

In addition to the alphabet in first grade and the two posters in fourth grade, both classrooms include other types of environmental texts. In Gertrudis' class there are small, commercially-produced, laminated posters containing the shapes and their names, such as "triangle", "rectangle", and "square", as well as a large picture of the human body with labels of the major body parts. Under the chalkboard appears each of the children's names. She has also hung in the back of the room some examples of student-produced work, namely small pieces of paper on which they have written several characteristics of "good" students (i.e. respect, responsibility). Octavio's class includes, at the back of the room, a bulletin board with large sheets of paper containing the students' grades (for both fourth and sixth grades). Moreover, he often posts poems or short stories, written by select students and edited by the teacher, over one of the windows.

2.3.3.2. Case-study children

By the month of November, the researcher began focusing his attention on three case-study children in each classroom, chosen based on perceived literacy abilities (1 low, 1 average, 1 high). Criteria included in this classification were level of in-class participation, oral reading fluency, and quality and quantity of writing. Choice of the students was made by both the researcher, who had intuitions regarding individual students' abilities, and by the teachers, who had known and interacted with these students

in their classes since the beginning of the semester, and were thus able to confirm the researcher’s hunches. It is important to mention that Gertrudis had spent much more class-time with her students than had Octavio, given that he was only with these children during their literacy class. These six students were the focus of later classroom observations and were likewise interviewed during the months of December and January. As seen in Table 2.2, four of these six students were labeled as “transnationals”, given that each of them had relatives living abroad, although the children themselves reported that they had never traveled outside Mexico.

As illustrated below in Table 2.2, the three case-study children selected from first grade were Fabiola, Alicia, and César (all pseudonyms). Fabiola is a 6-year-old female who has been in the school for only 6 months. She and her family recently moved to the area after living for three years in northern Mexico. She has three brothers and sisters. Fabiola’s mother mentioned that they have relatives (uncles/aunts) who immigrated to the state of Florida. According to Gertrudis, her teacher, Fabiola is an excellent student who always pays attention and completes her assignments. She is likewise a good reader and writer, usually one of the first children to finish their work. At her table of three she often takes control and helps her peers. For example, when working with cut-out letters she

Table 2.2 Participating Case-Study Students

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Grade level	Years at current school	Literacy abilities	Trans-national status
Fabiola	6	female	first	6 months	high	Yes
Alicia	6	female	first	4 (since preschool)	average	No
César	7	male	first	1	low	No
Cristina	10	female	fourth	2	high	Yes
Mario	10	male	fourth	4	average	Yes
Alejandra	9	female	fourth	1	low	Yes

sometimes tells them which ones to choose and how to order them.

Alicia is also 6 years old and has spent a total of four years in the school, ever since she began preschool at the age of two. She has two sisters. The teacher commented that she is an average student who usually participates. Nevertheless, she is frequently scolded for chatting with her tablemates instead of working, which means that she sometimes fails to complete her assignments. For instance, during a recent observation she was told by Gertrudis to leave the classroom if she preferred to talk.

The final case-study child from the first grade is César, a 7-year-old male who enrolled last August. Prior to the current school year he attended a local preschool for two years. He is an only child. Early observations identified César as a distracted child who prefers to play around in class instead of working either individually or with other students. He seldom pays attention and only completes assignments when Gertrudis approaches and helps him. For some reason he does not seem to get along well with his classmates, given that he usually works alone (even while sitting at a table with other students) and talks principally to the teacher and researcher.

The three case-study children from fourth grade were Cristina, Mario, and Alejandra (pseudonyms). Cristina is 10 years old and has been in the school for two years. She commented that she has uncles/aunts and cousins who immigrated to Spain, in addition to a cousin currently living in North Carolina. Cristina spent her first years of elementary school in a local public institution, in which, according to her interview, the teachers were often absent and the classes too large. Octavio mentioned that she was always on-task and seemed extremely interested in the reading and writing activities in his class. During group activities she likes to be the leader, typically planning out each

member's task. For example, when the class was to perform a skit based on a play they had read (in which a man pretended to be dead so that his wife would feel bad about not cooking what he wanted), she determined their roles and instructed them on what to say and do.

Mario is a 10-year-old boy who has been in this school during all four years of his elementary education. He has two brothers and sisters and responded during the interview that his aunt and uncle moved to New York approximately eight years ago. Notes from the observations identify him as an average student who normally participates and completes the assignments, although often with some degree of difficulty. His mother commented in her interview that he had been born with slight brain damage, which affected his learning ability and made him quite hyperactive. However, he appears to try his best and is very sociable with his classmates.

Alejandra, a 9-year-old girl in the fourth grade, first enrolled in this school last August. She had spent the previous two years in a public elementary school in a nearby urban area. She has one sister. Moreover, Alejandra has aunts and uncles both in Chile and in the United States (California). Octavio claims that she is often distracted (preferring to socialize) during Spanish class. Indeed, the researcher has noticed that the teacher frequently asks her to be quiet and to pay attention. Nonetheless, she mentioned during her interview that she enjoyed Spanish class and considered that she was learning much more than in her previous school. Outside class she can usually be found with friends, as she is extremely friendly and talkative.

2.3.4. Parents

During the months of December and January, the researcher contacted and interviewed (see chapter three) the mothers of the six children chosen for case study. It was decided to interview mothers as opposed to fathers for two reasons. First, when the researcher went to the school to talk to parents (which occurred during one week at the time the children were picked up from school), it was the mother in all six cases who came for the child and thus with whom the researcher set up dates for the interviews. Second, it was assumed that the mother would be an ideal informant of each child's literacy abilities and interests, given that mothers regularly help children with their homework and have contact with their teachers. This assumption was confirmed throughout the study. These participants were questioned, with their informed consent, about literacy and literacy practices in order to compare and contrast their attitudes and perceptions. Below is a detailed description of these six families, including a calculation of their socio-economic status (SES) based on the following scale:

1. Parents' professions (unemployed – 0, employee – 2, boss – 4)
Total: 0-8
2. Mother's formal schooling (some high school – 1, high school graduate – 2, technical degree – 3, college – 4)
Total: 0-4
3. Number of people living in the home (five – 1, four – 2, three – 3)
Total: 0-3

Low SES = 0-5
Middle SES = 6-10
High SES = 11-15

These three aspects were chosen as determinants of socio-economic status in accordance with the following rationale. First, these questions were asked of all the participants during the interviews; thus, this information could be compared for the six

parents. Second, it was assumed that profession, formal schooling, and number of people living in each home would serve as reasonable predictors of social category. It is important to mention that this research site is quite distinct from that of other contexts, specifically the United States, in that SES cannot be established on factors such as free or reduced lunch, which are non-existent in this particular setting. Therefore, it seemed logical to base this decision on the three aspects pointed out above. Significantly, profession seems somewhat more revealing than formal schooling considering that it is not uncommon for individuals with technical and university degrees to stay at home with the children. Likewise, it could be argued, at least in this context, that the number of people living in each home is inversely related to financial resources (i.e. more children implies more expenses).

The parents with children in the first grade are Lucia, Melisa, and Tania (pseudonyms). Lucia (Fabiola's mother) is a 26-year-old housewife who completed a two-year course at beauty school after finishing middle school. She comes from northern Mexico and has been living in the local community with her three children for six months. Her husband still works in the north as a trailer operator, and according to her, visits the rest of the family two or three times a year. When asked if she ever wrote letters to her father, Fabiola told the researcher that she only talked with him over the phone. Lucia and her husband have four children and have never traveled abroad. *SES = 6*

Melisa (Alicia's mother) is 38 years old and received a bachelor's degree in Chemistry from a local public university. Although having previously worked as a high-school science teacher, she presently stays at home caring for her three children. Her husband holds a degree in Education and is employed as an educational consultant. She

and her family (three daughters) have been residents in a nearby small town for a total of six years. They have never traveled outside Mexico. *SES* = 9

Tania (César’s mother), age 34, works as a sales agent of heavy machinery. She comes from southwestern Mexico and is a high-school graduate. During the interview she responded that she had been living about a mile from the school for approximately two years, renting a two-story apartment. Her husband currently works for a local automobile industry. *SES* = 9

Table 2.3 Participating Parents

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Child’s name and grade level	Current Occupation	Highest Level of Formal Schooling Completed	Years living in community	SES
Lucia	26	female	Fabiola - first	housewife	2-year beauty school	0.5	middle (6)
Melisa	38	female	Alicia - first	housewife	B.S. Chemistry	6	middle (9)
Tania	34	female	César - first	Sales agent	high school graduate	2	middle (9)
Ariana	33	female	Cristina - fourth	housewife	technical school (secretary)	11	middle (9)
Carla	33	female	Mario - fourth	school monitor, nurse	2-year technical school (nursing)	11	middle (6)
Susana	32	female	Alejandra - fourth	housewife	1 year of high school	1	low (5)

The parents of the three fourth-graders are Ariana, Carla, and Susana (pseudonyms). Ariana (Cristina’s mother) is a 33-year-old housewife from a nearby urban area who has resided in the local community for a total of eleven years. She

completed a technical degree as a secretary, although now she has chosen to stay home with the two children. Her husband is a veterinarian. They have never traveled outside Mexico. *SES = 9*

Carla (Mario's mother) works at the research site as a nurse and school monitor (although some of the children are not aware of her duty as a nurse), watching the children during drop-off in the morning, during recess, and when their parents come for them after school. Currently 33, she graduated from a technical school (2.5 years) specializing in nursing. She and her family (three children, one of which is mentally retarded) have lived in the area for eleven years. At the moment, her husband is unemployed. *SES = 6*

The last parent interviewed was Susana (Alejandra's mother), age 32, who completed only one year of high school and is a self-identified housewife. Having spent most of her life in Mexico City, she and her husband, a sales representative, moved to the community one year ago in order to escape the crime and fast-paced life of the city. They have two daughters and have never traveled abroad. *SES = 5*

According to the linguistic census, described above, these mothers are typical parents at the Centro Telpochcalli. More specifically, on the census questionnaire a majority of the female respondents classified themselves as *amas de casa* [housewives], similar to four out of six of the women in this study. (The other two participating mothers hold steady jobs). Likewise, the participants are somewhat representative of other parents at the school in that half of them have completed at least a two-year technical degree. Finally, whereas 60% of the families who participated in the linguistic census were classified as "middle" SES, five out of six of the families in this study were assigned to

this category based on the scale described above. The other family was considered “low” SES, given the mother’s unemployment and the fact that she completed only one year of high school, coinciding with only a small percentage (17%) of those who were classified as “low” in the analysis of the census questionnaire. A major limitation of the study, which is elaborated in chapter five, is that very little is known about the male parents.