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On literacy, reading, and learning to read in Mexico

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Abstract In this article, we explore the meanings of literacy, and more specifically of reading, in the Mexican context from a sociocultural perspective and as a social practice, underlining the technologies, competence, knowledge, beliefs, and values that permeate literacy use. We consider the historical, cultural, and multilingual specificities of Mexican readers, many of whom belong to communities where using written language is a fairly recent development. We note that the language learning experiences of marginalized communities often occur in a sociopolitical context of asymmetric power relationships; and, because of this, it is imperative to frame theories of biliteracies and multilingualism that reveal language ideologies and sociopolitical factors. Our aim is to pursue a deeper understanding of literacies in everyday life and to recognize the multiple practices of diverse communities. In turn, this understanding can help frame new courses of action for shaping literacy research and agendas in this part of the world.

Keywords Literacy · Mexico · Social practice · Multilingualism · Reading

To appreciate what it means to learn how to read necessarily requires a discussion of what we mean by "reading", how it is used in the social world, and its connections to lives and sociocultural activities. It also demands a look at readers in diverse and situated contexts and at how literacy is accomplished: children, adolescents, and adults; students, teachers, and parents; policymakers, politicians, and administrators; and monolingual and multilingual speakers in diverse communities (Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Gumperz 1982; Heath and Street 2008). In this article, we examine the multiple social meanings and

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perceptions of reading in the contemporary Mexican context. We argue that learning goes beyond the decoding of words and the comprehension of their explicit meanings, and implies a complex process of appropriating the uses, conventions, and understandings of texts in ways that allow readers to construct its significance in the context of their lives. It is our contention that learning to read encompasses place, space, and pace: as a situated activity (or series of activities), it occurs in physical and geographic settings, in socially constructed contexts, and with varying intensities, timings, and rhythms.

Reading and literacy in public discourses in Mexico

Contrary to dominant versions and perceptions of readers and reading in Mexico, we see reading as a vibrant, visible, everyday practice across contexts in our country. On a day-to-day basis, one can observe children sharing texts on public transportation; young people exchanging music, texts, and images on their phones; and adults reading newspapers and flyers while sitting in waiting rooms in health clinics or on the subway. This is not to say that written culture, reading materials, and literacy practices are equally distributed across all situations or easily accessed by the linguistically and culturally diverse populations that make up the country. Despite this, we note that over the last 30 years or so, the reading public in Mexico has grown noticeably. In 2006, Goldin remarked that in Mexico reading and writing were traditionally an activity of only a few, and that it was not for everybody. Only very recently did it stop "being a privilege for just a few and became a requirement for everyone" (2006, p. 20).

Reading is an important component of Mexico's current cultural agenda, educational policies, and public service campaigns, and the news media frequently report on it. Federal, state, and local governments, as well as private and nongovernmental organizations, actively promote reading programs of different kinds—book fairs, book mobiles, reading marathons, just to name a few. Compared to the Mexican context, in other countries literacy has come to have multiple connotations, and reading implies understanding, discussing, using, and circulating a wide variety of texts in print and digital formats. This is the result of, on the one hand, the proliferation of multiple textual environments for communicating and understanding social discourses and, on the other, a distancing from a conceptualization of reading centered on books and learned text. Lemke (2013, p. 57) notes:

> [Literacy] has moved from the traditional meaning, limited to comprehension of "serious" formal print texts, to a redress of the original bias towards reading alone and so to placing more emphasis on the ability to write such texts. … [T]he idea of literacy has grown from an exclusive emphasis on print and verbal literacy to acknowledging the multisemiotic, multimodal nature of the media that are important to our lives and our identities. … [O]ur uses of literacy have become coextensive with living our lives: across places and times, across media and the roles we play in diverse activities, across the different communities in which we participate.

The above quote describes many of the recent transformations we are observing and experiencing in our understanding of literacy in Mexico, and what it means to learn and know how to read. For generations, the idea of reading was limited to those practices closely aligned to privileged people's use of language. Although there is a mention of elementary education and *alfabetización* (literacy) in the 1830s in national policies in Mexico (Hernández Mejía 2003), it is not until almost 100 years later, in the 1920s, that the idea of universal reading began to gather force. Such policy was enacted after the Mexican

Revolution under the direction of José Vasconcelos, the first secretary of education (1921–1927), who organized literacy brigades and distributed translations of classic texts printed in small pamphlets to *campesinos* (field workers). In 2000, illiteracy rates finally began to dip below 10% (INEGI 2000).

In this article, we are interested in exploring the meanings of literacy, and, more specifically, of reading in the Mexican context from a sociocultural perspective. We adapt Street's (2000) New Literacy Studies (NLS) framework to focus on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice rather than to focus on skills, abilities, or habits. By viewing reading and writing as a social practice, we imply the use of technologies, skill, and knowledge as well as the beliefs and values that permeate them (Barton and Hamilton 1998; Scribner and Cole 1980). Moreover, we would argue that reading and writing as situated practices should be conceived as a heterogeneous and plural notion rather than a singular construct: instead of literacy, literacies (Kalman 2004a). We have sought to identify and understand different types of texts, diverse purposes, and multiple ways of reading and writing as a way of revealing broader, more open, and more inclusive panorama of who readers and writers are, what they do, and why they do it (Geertz 1983). In particular, we propose a nuanced notion of literacy so that we might take into account the historical, cultural, and multilingual specificities of Mexican readers, many of whom belong to communities where using written language is a fairly recent development. To think about literacy in the twenty-first century includes pondering such issues as what it means to learn to read, and whether we ever finish learning to read. Relevant questions for developing localized versions of reading are: who reads (and writes)? where do they read (and write)? how do they read (and write)? what is their purpose for doing so? and, what are the social consequences of their reading and writing? Furthermore, it involves understanding who controls and authorizes texts; what languages are involved in literacy events; what types of reading and writing are—and are not—socially prestigious (and according to whom); and, by extension, what kinds of readers and writers are—and are not—highly valued.

While reading is on the rise in Mexico, opportunities for reading and writing are still unequally distributed across communities. A 2016 study by UNICEF and Coneval (Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social) reports that of 40 million children (ages 0–17) more than 50% (21.4 million) live in poverty. In contrast with their more well-to-do counterparts, they may live in communities where one sees little use of print and multimodal signs in the public thoroughfare; few books are available at home (in rural areas there will most likely be no public library); schools are scarce, overcrowded, or underequipped; there is no internet connectivity; and reading and writing may not be common social activities. In these circumstances, opportunities for literacy experiences pale in comparison to those for children growing up in more lettered, connected, and socially and economically integrated communities.

Along with other countries in Latin America, Mexico is making efforts to use and promote the use of written indigenous languages in the public sphere. Literacy in indigenous communities continues to be complex and insufficiently understood, in part because of power dynamics among members of different linguistic communities. Ferreiro (1993) and Martínez Casas (2014) have argued that what is needed is twofold: written versions of these original languages to be used as a means of communication, and the participation of indigenous writers who can create written texts within and for their cultures. Within the context of education, Mexico has made efforts to create programs that emphasize the development of a strong sense of identity among learners and the ability to speak, read, and write both the dominant and indigenous languages. In some situations,

policymakers have added a multilingual program to the local and public schools, so children benefit from a third language—often English, due to its popularity in pop music and its economic role in tourist zones.

Reading across space, place, and pace

Much of what we know about reading and readers in Mexico comes primarily from studies carried out in large cities; we know much less about small towns or rural areas. Recent research provides a diverse picture of how reading is experienced and is alive in various spaces within the Mexican context (Alvarado 2010; Hernández Razo 2015; Guerrero 2014, Hernández 2013; Jimenez and Smith 2008). Because of their broad definitions, we situate literacy and learning to read within readers and their contexts. In particular, reading and learning to read do not occur in the abstract. In order to see reading taking place, we will always need to identify specific readers and observe them in specific places, at specific times, reading specific materials for diverse and specific purposes. Reading is an activity, and as such, it is socially organized; it involves texts, readers, organization of participants, interaction, interpretation, and use. Lave (2011, p. 151) notes that human activity is a situated practice, which assumes that "subjects, objects, lives and worlds are made in their relations. That is, the contexts of people's lives aren't merely containers or backdrops. … [P]ersons are always located uniquely in space, and in their relations with other persons, things, practices and institutional arrangements".

Our exploration of relevant literature in Mexico, also highlights the multilingual, border-crossing, complex, and heterogeneous linguistic realities that characterize Mexico. The linguistic communities who depart from "standard" Spanish (such as members of indigenous, youth, popular, or digital cultures) are alive and locally validated within these vernacular linguistic groups in the form of traditional texts, practices, and uses. Moreover, this diversity also refers to *how* readers read in different social groups, in cultural affiliations, by age, across generations, across backgrounds, and in different media—paper or digital—to interact with everyday communication. These reading-generating practices by local communities help prioritize the uses and functions of reading for those involved.

As reading and writing became widespread societal demands, and not required just of a privileged few (Goldin 2006), programs to "educate" and become "literate" spread across communities. But, as several of us have documented (García Canclini et al. 2015; Guerrero 2014; Kalman and Street 2013; Reyes 2016), it is through sociocultural practices and their functions that we can understand how reading is enacted in everyday lives. A growing number of scholars situated in Latin America have made research a priority and available to other readers elsewhere; their work contextualizes the learning and the process of reading for diverse communities. The work by Kalman and Street (2008, 2013) examines the complexities of speakers' reading and writing practices in communities across the region and beyond. This research makes visible the local specificities attributable to their context as well as their place in global sites and institutions, and the new directions literacy and numeracy research is taking in the Americas.

The language-learning experiences of marginalized communities often occur in a sociopolitical context of asymmetric power relationships, in which one language has higher status than another (Hornberger 2014; Lopez-Gopar, Sughrua, and Clemente 2011). Because of this, we must frame theories of multilingualism and biliteracies within a critical view of language ideologies and sociopolitical factors that help or hinder the development

of literacy for native and indigenous groups, and that impact children's literacy practices and ideologies and how they position themselves in different social contexts as they learn (or not) how to read and write.

In this multicultural context, Azuara (2009) documented the reading practices of Maya-speaking children and their families in a rural community of Yucatan, Mexico. Although Maya is the first language for most adults and children, many children consider themselves passive bilinguals who can understand Maya but rarely speak it. Moreover, when they start school, children face the dual challenges of learning Spanish as their second language and of learning to read and write in the dominant language. Other findings also reveal that children's use of the dominant and native languages is determined by the *functions* for which language and reading are used in specific contexts (Azuara and Reyes 2011; Reyes 2016). That is, if appropriate contexts and speakers exist to provide these children with the tools and mediators they need to develop in the indigenous language, they have the potential to develop bilingualism and perhaps also biliteracy at home and school. For one of the case studies, Axel and his family, their everyday practice of Maya was related to various social uses, but primarily they read texts related to religion and to obtaining information. The family was active in their church and participated in special events and Bible study group in Maya. Similarly, in terms of religious function, Luna (2010) documented the presence of reading through the creation of multimodal religious testimonies, *ex votos*, where traditional expressions of devotion take place through design, production, display, and reading of multimodal representations of miracles and sacred events. She refers to this particular cultural expression as a *práctica de lectoescritura,* noting that this practice involves both reading and writing. We have observed others who use practices similar to these, including immigrant families at the border and rural women studying and learning how to read as adults (Guerrero 2014; Reyes and Moll 2008).

Learning to read and extending reading practices often take place in the context of everyday activities, in multiple spaces, and in unforeseen circumstances. Kalman (2001, 2003) documented multiple reading practices of women with little or no schooling, living in marginalized communities on the eastern edge of Mexico City. In their narratives and through shared literacy events, they commented on reading a variety of texts and print materials: knitting instructions, official documents, catalogues, and medications. Rosario, for example, described how she read and filled out order sheets in her job as a door-to-door cosmetic salesperson. When she visited her customers, she looked through the catalogues with them. On the company order sheet, Rosario had to fill out the summary in the right spaces. She explained how she read the catalogue and the order sheet: "For example, the name of this brush is on the page and it says what it is for. … The summary has some squares and some circles and you fill them in according to how many get ordered, if they ask for three, then you fill in three circles" (p. 383). Carolina, another woman in Kalman's study (2009), explained how the nurses at a public hospital helped her learn to read information regarding medications, a thermometer, and medical records so that she could care for her chronically sick child. Learning to read and being a reader clearly connect us to the world in different ways (García Canclini et al. 2015; Kalman 2002). Roger Chartier (1992) notes that "there is always a community that reads with us and for whom we read. Reading is learned in the heart of a group, of a culture that conditions our choices and our access to text" (in García Canclini et al. 2015, p. 11). Spaces across communities support people's literacy efforts, while written materials (flyers, books) occupy a key component of public spaces and workplaces (Chartier 1992). Written material in the digital era often occupies new spaces—although not physically tangible; its dimensions of *how, when,* and by *whom* mark the ways in which local knowledge integrates the local histories of readers

within their learning communities into global communications. For example, Hernández Razo (2015) documented that adults (some with jobs, some unemployed) understand the need to learn how to use computers and to develop new tools through computing classes, because they see these skills as part of a new discourse. As he noted when interviewing these adults, *"[P]orque ahora ya se necesita para todo"* ("[B]ecause you need it [computer knowledge] for everything now") (p. 114). This collection of examples—from the Yucatan to urban learners—illustrates the ever-expanding and -diversifying uses and meanings of reading in multiple situated practices. Readers transact with texts in diverse formats in everyday contexts and for multiple purposes (Goodman 1996).

Learning to read in school and literacy programs

In Mexico, learning to read usually signals two types of learners: children entering school where they will be taught to read, and adults—referred to as *analfabetas* or *analfabetas funcionales*—who did not learn to read as children or read very poorly. For children and adults alike, the prevalent view of the teaching of reading in Mexico has centered on a set of isolated features—decoding and encoding sound to text, repetition, and memorization of letter sounds. These tenets and procedures contrast sharply with those from sociocultural and NLS perspectives (see previous section) that show how reading connects us to the world through texts and representations (Kalman 2002; García Canclini et al. 2015; Kalman 2001; Reyes and Esteban-Guitart 2013).

For young children, learning to read begins from the moment they experience their mother's voice and the voices of those around them as they begin to connect objects, events, meaning, and language. With time and the critical role of interaction with peers and adults as part of literacy and reading experiences, young children construct knowledge and oral fluidity that is their base for developing concepts of print, narrative, and eventually reading (Zero to Three 2016). Reading and writing at school should go beyond reading *skills*—e.g., vocabulary, phonemic awareness, phonics, and so on—and should prioritize the social meanings that make reading a worthwhile and pleasurable experience and practice; embrace a joy for stories, wordcraft, and participating in and around texts; and develop students' taste for intellectual challenge. Moreover, children bring diverse literacy experiences from home; these, as well, must count as valuable for what children will experience as they enter school, because each way of thinking, speaking, and reading "highlights particular knowledge and ways in which community members contribute to young children's literacy development" (Reyes and Esteban-Guitart 2013).

According to a recent survey, parents of young children in Mexico consider *learning to read* the single most important ability their children will acquire as they enter school (Alvarado 2010). For many, learning to read, then, is expected to happen, predominantly in school and in specific teacher-directed exercises. However, this belief ignores how this learning begins *before* children enter school, as they experience literacy-related print and concepts available in their immediate environment (Goodman 1996). Therefore, we specifically argue the importance of formal education's taking into consideration home and community as spaces and places where young children develop early literacy tools that will enable them to integrate the local practices of their worlds with those of the school. An example of a project based on creating such spaces emerged in the last decade, called the *Bebeteca* (baby-family library), where the space is dedicated to reading *for* and *with* babies. Popular in Europe, these places provide children and their parents with music, toys,

puppets, and age-appropriate literature. This concept has now become part of public spaces in some communities in the states of Puebla and Queretaro, and in Mexico City. Family members dedicate time to reading books, playing with their children, having fun, and enjoying each other's company. This continuous presence of early literacy at home and in the community seems to contribute to early academic success in school literacy (Escalante Cárdenas 2015; Gregory, Long, and Volk 2004).

Despite efforts to transform reading pedagogies in the classroom, longstanding initial reading exercises and approaches centered on "sounding out words", reproducing letter shapes, recognizing words, comprehending questions, and copying and defining isolated words are still widespread in Mexican schools. This is reflected in the specific situated uses of reading and writing at school; in the variety of methods still prevalent in the education system and observable in classroom activities based on rote exercises; in reading evaluations based on how many words a child reads per minute; and on the dissemination of normative and prescriptive conventions of how to read and write. In this sense, we understand school reading to be a situated practice and contend that the brand of reading promoted in schools is a restricted version of literacy geared to the specific objectives promoted in school-type learning. Therefore, the emphasis on academic readiness drives children and their teachers to want to succeed only in reading and mathematics assignments and assessments—thus leaving their creativity, and other forms of sharing their knowledge and learning experiences, not worthy of embrace in the classroom.

Some researchers in Mexico describe a more nuanced, diverse, and complex situation in schools. For example, Rockwell (2013) has also made important contributions to the study of reading and writing as cultural practice in classroom settings. Her study centers on reading in a rural school in Mexico, analyzing how the layout of the textbook and the ways in which reading was accomplished influenced the outcome of the lesson. Gloria Hernández (2013) examines the relationship between rural students' reading and writing practices, and school expectations and curriculum. She finds that young people who have constructed experiences with writing throughout their lives acquire a distinctive place in the way they position themselves in relation to literacy at school. This positioning surpasses the mere oral function announced in many textbook activities to include their understanding of the contexts in which these practices are used and constructed.

Mexico and several other countries in Latin America also need to address multiple *literacies* from the perspectives of bilingualism and biliteracy. This refers specifically to Mexico's diverse bilingual and biliteracy development of children whose original language might be Spanish and their family language indigenous. Their language-learning experiences often occur in a sociopolitical context of asymmetric power relationships, in which one language has higher status than the other (Martínez Casas 2014; Reyes 2009). Because of this, it is imperative to frame reading and learning to read within critical theories concerning language ideologies and sociopolitical factors that either enable or impede the development of literacy for native and indigenous groups. Often, administrative and curricular decisions affect children's literacy practices and how they align themselves in different social contexts. Unfortunately, current educational policies in Mexico and other Latin American countries often impose politically motivated agendas and curricula that do not meet children's needs and that deliberately marginalize their native languages.

For adults who learn to read late in life (Kalman 2004b), government agencies offer programs such as CONAFE (Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo/National Advisory Board for Education Programs) and INEA (Instituto Nacional de Educación de Adultos) and other *alfabetización* programs. These programs emphasize reading the word, and not the world, to meet a goal in national and international policies (Freire and Macedo 1989). It

is the more extensive, articulated experiences that contribute to adults' appropriation of written language (Kalman 2004a, b). Some adult women in rural contexts, as Seda and colleagues report (Galván Silva 2014), preferred to continue using oral literacy and memory as strategies to communicate their thoughts, as they consider time and cost in their daily activities. That case stresses the significance of the oral-reading-literacy continuum in the process of becoming a reader, because it validates the speaker's existing capacities to learn and transmit her knowledge in her native language while integrating her newly constructed knowledge into reading and sharing local stories.

It is also believed, as revealed by INEA-designed literacy programs and materials, that adults who do not know how to read must go through the same kind of "training" children are put through, although they can do it at their own pace. INEA's reading and writing series, available online, are organized in three "levels": Beginner (functional literacy), Intermediate (primary school), and Advanced (middle school). The beginning-reading lessons includes copying words and phrases; dictation; writing short messages; rules for using capital letters; reading words, sentences, and short texts; and answering comprehension questions, among other well-known exercises. For adults considered illiterate, INEA promotes phonemic analysis, syllable building, and word families for learning to read.

All of the above exercises and assignments illustrate a *training*, a rote learning memorization approach to teaching literacy, with little consideration for adults' understanding and experience with literacy practices (Figure 1). In contrast, in 2003 CREFAL (Centro de Cooperación Regional para la Educación de Adultos en América Latina) published a theme issue of its journal, *Decisio,* on written culture and adult education. This collection of papers, written for literacy practitioners and program designers, emphasizes the relationship between written and oral language, and the notion of multiple literacies. Furthermore, these researchers collectively explore the use of writing as a vehicle for learning and self-expression, as well as the complex relationship between those who read and write well and those who *want* to do so. All of these notions extend the traditional boundaries of the concept of *alfabetización.*

Besides schooling, the Mexican federal government also promotes a series of reading programs as part of their education and cultural policies. Based on the notion that reading is a desirable *habit* and, as such, should be encouraged, the common philosophy is that making reading materials (especially books) available will socially disseminate reading and reading-related activities, and that the presence of books will increase readership. These actions come under the label of *promoción de la lectura* (promoting reading); they seek to distribute reading materials, create spaces for reading and readers, and sponsor different types of workshops and events for the general public—such as public readings of literary works, theater, puppet shows, reader response, and literary appreciation and (in some cases) analysis. Several nongovernmental organizations also participate in these crusades, sometimes as partners with federal and local governments and sometimes on their own. Specific programs include book clubs; a reading-in-the-subway program that lends books to commuters; and the *Paralibros and Parabici* programs (bus and bicycle stops with books), which install mobile express libraries of 365 books (minimum) to offer the option of reading one book a day throughout the year. These mobile libraries are placed in plazas, parks, botanical gardens, and zoo entrances as a way to support moments of literacy, to *respirar*—breathe and read (García Canclini et al. 2015, p. 64). The idea behind this initiative is for the transient reader to take her time, at her own pace, to read and enjoy

Figure 1 Literacy materials developed by INEA
Source: SEP and INEA 2015

reading as an enjoyable activity, and not as school-like, required activity (Vizacarra et al. 2012, as cited in García Canclini et al. 2015).

Reading ideologies in mainstream discourse

Politicians, officials, and social commentators tend to point to low book sales and poor results on standardized evaluations (INEE 2016) as proof that Mexicans don’t read, can’t read, or don’t want to read. We contend, however, that the diverse, widespread, and observable reading activities present in multiple settings and contexts provides evidence for confirming quite the opposite: reading is on the rise and is an established and expanding social practice. It includes printed books, magazines, newspapers, flyers, announcements, invitations; texts spread across TV screens, subtitles on movies and shows, and public service announcements; and digital multimodal texts of every kind.

Decades ago, Street (1984) pointed out the ideological dimensions of reading and writing by examining how what we know and think about literacy is tied to broader belief systems, doctrines, and social visions. Hence, the different meanings of what reading represents for Mexican society are embedded in understandings of power relations and conceptions of what reading is, what counts as reading, what reading materials society values, and the purposes, processes, and outcomes of reading (Street 2000). For this reason, it is not surprising that reading is a locus for debate between those who hold an instrumental view of reading and its consequences, and those who insist on a more nuanced understanding of how written texts play into the communicative life of communities.

Reading has been, and continues to be, a central concern for educators in Mexico. They have long considered it as the entry into formal schooling, and it also serves as an institutional gatekeeper barring those who do not learn to read well early on. Policymakers promote education, in turn, as one of the solutions to the social and economic inequalities that have historically characterized Mexican society, and they consider it to be a pathway toward social and economic mobility. This explains, at least in part, why reading is an important component of Mexico's public discourse, particularly current cultural and educational policies, public service announcements, and the news media. A recent search for "reading" online, for example, displayed nearly 100,000 articles just for 2017. Many of these articles point to and appreciate the growing reading public in Mexican society, as reported in the 2015 national survey on reading (Conaculta 2015), but at the same time lament that a significant portion of the population spends their free time "watching television rather than reading". In April 2016, a local politician in Mexico City noted, "[T]he present and the future of Mexico would substantially improve if society was educated, if it was prepared, and competent to participate in any area of knowledge…We have to find the way for that 40 percent that has never entered into a bookstore to go in and dare to buy a book" (GrupoFórmula 2016).

Many consider reading, writing, and certain mainstream discourse practices to be required for success at school and social hallmarks of being *educated*. Given this, marginalized and excluded populations (urban poor, monolingual speakers of indigenous languages, and those living in remote areas) have been historically at a disadvantage because their uses of reading and writing, as well as their language practices in general, are not only distant from majority language and discourse but also do not "count" in the dominant (and official) eye. For example, the Program Sectorial de Educación 2013–18 includes a reading program for women aimed at eliminating gender discrimination, with the explicit objective to "create reading and literature appreciation groups for paid and unpaid working women" (SEP 2013b, p. 65). This illustrates the kind of reading that official policies value highly and boost (SEP 2013a). Likewise, in a recent award ceremony for a booktuber contest, where the Secretary of Education presented prizes to the winning contestants, he noted part of the ongoing transformation of education in Mexico includes urging the habit of reading at home and school. These programs and expressions exemplify that reading—and particularly reading books—is ideologically charged, a prestigious activity in the ongoing dominant social discourse. Furthermore, they illustrate the presence and reiteration of centralized official discourse and beliefs (Bahktin 1981): reading is constructed as a remedy for inequalities, as the basis for participating in all fields of knowledge, is equivalent to being "educated"; "real" reading is equated with reading books.

However, both academic work and critiques of policies have debated and contested the very concept of literacy (García Canclini et al. 2015; Jimenez and Smith 2008; Kalman 1993, 2004a, 2004b, 2006). Literacy is generally translated to Spanish as *alfabetización* or

alfabetismo, which is defined as the ability to read and write, and points to the most rudimentary and mechanical aspects of decoding. It is widespread in official documents and curriculum, and closely links reading and writing to school literacy. For example, in the *Programa Sectorial de Educación, 2013–18*, "alfabetización" is defined as the act of teaching reading, writing, and basic notions of mathematics to people 15 years of age or older, so that they can get an elementary education (*"Actividad que consiste en enseñar a leer, escribir y procurar nociones de matemáticas a personas de 15 años y más, a efecto de que puedan cursar la educación primaria"* [SEP 2013b, p. 101]). Here, the notion of literacy is integrated with school learning and refers to teaching adults how to read and write so that they can achieve a basic education certificate. As such, it is a restricted notion of what counts as literacy, and, conceptually, it does not capture the complexities and nuanced meanings and uses of "literacy". Over the last two decades, researchers in Mexico and Latin America have used alternative terms such as *cultura escrita* (written culture), *prácticas lectoescritoras* (reading and writing practices), and more recently, *literacidad*, a direct translation of "literacy".

Across Latin America, reading has become the target of national statistics and surveys. The Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI 2006) in Mexico, for example, has conducted surveys with the specific purpose of measuring and accounting for reading levels and practices since 2006. A proposal for a region wide methodology for conducting these types of surveys (CERLALC 2014) suggested covering such aspects as motivations for reading (pleasure or learning), what people read (books or other materials), how many books people read, how people get books (purchase or borrowing), reading choice (topic or recommendation). However, these surveys have not gone without criticism (García Canclini et al. 2015; Goldin 2006). They tend to isolate reading as an action separated from other parts of social life; moreover, the options readers choose from give little information about how they accomplish or live reading in the context of everyday life. Kalman (2006) critiques the idea that becoming a reader is simply a matter of habit, and argues that written language use is deeply embedded in other communicative processes. Rodríguez (1995, as cited in Seda Santana 2000) noted that legislating literacy often comes up against the conditions and variations of cultures. Only more recently were other types of texts—magazines, newspapers, comics, online multimodal texts—considered part of "real" reading and included in INEGI's 2015 survey (García Canclini et al. 2015). It should also be noted that "reader", in these surveys, refers to the more consolidated and experienced readers. The 2015 reading survey in Mexico refers to readers 12 years or older, leaving out an important part of the population: younger and emergent readers. Nobel Prize winner James Heckman of the University Chicago has drawn attention to this often-overlooked population. He argues for the need to keep young readers in mind and notes that recognizing, following, and investing in our youngest readers will bring important returns to our societies as a whole (Heckman 2012).

In the last decades, research on reading and writing in Mexico has been dominated by tensions and hegemonic discourse among educators, policymakers, and researchers. Those working from a more traditional point of view who have seen and understood literacy—and more specifically, understanding written texts—as prerequisite not only for education but also for gainful employment and entrepreneurship. At the same time, these same professionals have touted literacy as essential for liberation. As a result, literacy for children has been prioritized, yet almost abandoned for adults; and efforts to understand literacy, within communities, have been so instrumental in nature that many questions remain unanswered.

Reading, the never-ending story

We argue that reading is a widespread, open-ended, multiple (and multiplying) practice. Even though reading books and school literacies continue to be dominant in the public discourse, we argue that they are situated practices like other reading and writing activities. We invite our multiple readers—teachers, administrators, policymakers, parents, students, researchers, and other interested parties—to pursue a deeper understanding of literacies in everyday life. These include the emergence of ICTs, the continuous renewal and invention of multiple types of texts and reading spaces, and the role of symbolic representations in identity-building among youth, women, indigenous people, and other historically marginalized groups. When we are able to broaden our understanding of literacy, we will be better positioned to contribute to the development of a more inclusive and participatory approach in which practices of diverse communities are visible, socially recognized, and valued. In turn, this understanding can help frame new courses of action for shaping literacy research and agendas in this part of the world.

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