

Theory to Practice

Assessing Adult Literacy in Belize, Central America: Challenge and Opportunity

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The small, beautiful Central American country of Belize is best known for its eco-tourism and magnificent barrier reef. These attractions are gaining increased notoriety and are on the agendas of more and more travelers. However, travelers to Belize seldom experience Belizean life outside the resorts or the wildlife and archaeological reserves.

Behind the tourist scene Belize is a country that faces many of the same problems as do other developing nations: the problem of immigration from other developing nations in Central America (namely Guatemala and Mexico), a low per capita income (\$1,990), a low literacy rate, poor health care, and an underdeveloped infrastructure (Culturgram '94: Belize, 1994). The good news is that, even with these problems, Belize differs significantly from other developing countries. Because of the advantages and opportunities found in Belize, desperation and despair are nearly absent.

One major advantage is that the countryside is largely underdeveloped and underpopulated. It remains lush, fertile, and capable of food production (Culturgram '94: Belize, 1994). The country has a population of approximately 200,000 in an area roughly the size of New Hampshire, which has a population of 1,125,000 (U. S. Department of Commerce, 1994). This lower population density gives Belize a sense that its future is yet to be determined. Furthermore, since the future is not yet determined, the hopelessness that is sometimes a part of developing countries is absent.

A second advantage is that Belizeans are law-abiding citizens who promote a sense of safety within its culture. The crime rate is not a problem

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that dehumanizes its population. Belizeans and internationals alike share a sense of security when doing business, traveling, and interacting with strangers.

A third advantage is the relationship Belize has with other countries. Belize is relatively isolated from its geographic neighbors because of cultural and language differences. Its neighbors are small, poorly developed, and Spanish speaking. Belize (its colonial name was British Honduras) is a member of the British Commonwealth and has its national defense guaranteed by Britain. Because Belize is an English-speaking nation, it enjoys close cultural ties with Britain and the United States.

These advantages, however, are counterbalanced by a major problem which Belize must face in order to become a viable nation: illiteracy. Belize is plagued by a low literacy rate of only 50% to 60% (Culturgram '94: Belize, 1994). This low rate causes difficulties for employers in their search for an educated and technologically literate work force. School is mandatory for children between the ages of 6 and 14 (Embassy of Belize, 1992), but many youth in rural Belize attend school for only a few years. Due to economic considerations, rural youth may quit school to obtain work in order to help support their families. Certainly, the lack of adult literacy limits the upward mobility among Belizean adult residents.

Fortunately, however, a country-wide effort has been undertaken to increase literacy. The agency charged with this task is the Literacy Council of Belize, which is making efforts to provide literacy training in all six districts of Belize. There are five programs in the northern district of Corozal, three in the Toledo district to the south, and several other programs in Belize City. The programs run in three, six-months cycles. Participant ages have ranged from 14 to 65, with roughly 35% of the participants over age 40 (H. Guerra, personal communication, March, 1995). In general, adults in the villages have a positive attitude toward the programs, and the participants are highly motivated. The Literacy Council programs both develop basic literacy skills and promote a higher sense of self-esteem.

According to Hugo Guerra, coordinator for the Belize Literacy Council, the Council's task is difficult for several reasons. First, funding is hard to obtain. UNICEF grants which began the program have expired. As these grants expired, the government of Belize was expected to continue the funding. However, the government of Belize has different priorities; it has targeted most of its funds for the education of children rather than adults. This action has left a significant portion of the population out of the education loop and has, in effect, left the illiterate

adult population to fend for itself. Although the federal government has given the Literacy Council a mandate to improve the literacy rate, it only funds a portion of the administrative, facility, and operational costs. This failure to back the mandate with dollars makes available little funds for curriculum development, teacher training, and other administrative expenses. It is clear from our interviews with Guerra and his assistant, Sayyidah Wallen-Ahmed (personal communication & observation, March, 1995) that the government must provide more financial support if the Literacy Council's effectiveness is to continue.

Because government support is lacking, private funding and other private resources are used for the work of the Literacy Council. These resources, however, are also scarce. The educational tradition in Belize is a church-state system, and in many areas churches advocate and provide facilities for the teaching of literacy. Although churches encourage members to become literate so that they are able to read and study the Bible (a tradition that was once common, as well, in the United States), most churches are unable to provide financial support beyond the sharing of facilities.

Culture and gender issues also make the task of increasing adult literacy in Belize difficult. Belize is, culturally, a rich mixture of Creole, Mestizo, Garifuna, Mayan, and Mennonite groups (Embassy of Belize, 1992). Although there is an outstanding level of ethnic tolerance, each group does have its own unique aspects. Literacy efforts must be adapted to each group, and each group must have its own curriculum and methods if the program is to be successful. Indeed, according to Guerra, the Literacy Council's work has been inhibited by the fact that many of the literacy teachers are unaware of local cultures and have a poor understanding of how to use local situations in literacy training.

An example of this issue is literacy efforts within the Mayan culture. In many rural areas the Mayan culture, village life, history, and tradition are becoming extinct. However, Mayans have a strong desire to preserve their culture, and this is the major reason village elders seek literacy training. Any successful program for the Mayans must include efforts to create culture centers that help preserve and document unwritten traditional customs. Originally, Literacy Council teachers were neither trained in the local Mayan culture nor given an understanding of how to use local situations in literacy training. Guerra has tried to address this problem, and the effectiveness of the Mayan Literacy Program has improved.

The Belizean culture includes an expectation of women while in the presence of men that is called the "Culture of Silence." Women are

discouraged from being assertive, seeking education, and making decisions. This culture trait has proven to be a difficult issue for the Literacy Council, and ways were sought to turn the gender issue into a positive force. One successful literacy session topic, "Maintaining the 'Culture of Silence' versus Women's Changing Roles," was used by the Literacy Council in its teaching methods. Interesting discussions that created a greater understanding between men and women were generated. The results of teaching efforts such as this indicate that the role of women in Belizean society can be much improved. If this gender problem is not solved and the silence not broken, however, the poor status of women may continue to limit adult literacy efforts. The good news is that not all regions are as prone to separate men from women; the problem is greater in some areas than in others.

The success of literacy efforts also rests with the development of literacy teachers and trainers. Currently teachers are given certification by the Chief of Education officer in Belize after only six years of primary school education (roughly equivalent to eight years of schooling in the United States). This training is insufficient, especially when culture and gender issues need to be considered in conjunction with subject content, teaching methodology, and general education. It is clear that more college and university-trained personnel are needed in the country's literacy efforts.

As a result of a visit to Belize and interviews with Literacy Council employees, the Permanent Secretary of Education, the principal of Belize Teachers' College and faculty at the University College of Belize (personal communication, March, 1995), the authors make the following recommendations for developing further adult literacy efforts in Belize:

1. Create linkages with literacy programs in countries that have the resources to help. Linking with programs in other countries might help create and develop research projects such as needs assessments, program delivery strategies, curricula, and teaching resources. Care should be taken to ensure that the projects include significant Belizean leadership so that the unique aspects of Belizean culture are considered.
2. Encourage and develop input from religious institutions outside Belize. Churches traditionally have an interest in world literacy and education. Various churches and denominations may be willing to provide short-term and long-term instructors and resources as part of their missionary activities.

3. Develop an initiative to train for computer literacy in order to take advantage of the educational resources available from the World-Wide Web (WWW), Internet, and other information technologies. The economy of Belize needs to focus on information which will complement the development of light industry, tourism, and agriculture. The WWW can serve as a valuable resource for this information as well as for information which directly contributes to the adult literacy work of the Belize Literacy Council.

Currently Belize is one of the bright spots in Central America. It has hope and opportunity which stem from a young, vital, and promising country. If the challenge of adult literacy can be met, the future for Belize will be brighter in the 21st century.

References

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