



‘Learning to read and write is to defend yourself’: Exploring Indigenous perspectives and reimagining literacies for self-determination in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

This study considers some of the ways in which engagements with literacies are embedded in social practices and produced and enacted through distinct ethnolinguistic and cultural histories. Drawing on research with learners and facilitators in an adult literacy program for Indigenous language speakers in Mexico, the findings reveal various meanings, values, and uses attached to literacies, including as a defense, a necessity, access to full knowledge, to express oneself, and to learn from one another. The study concludes that literacies are connected to the broader project of Indigenous self-determination.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, global efforts to address poverty and inequality have focused on improving access to and quality of basic education. The Sustainable Development Goal Framework (United Nations, 2015) highlighted the aim of ensuring ‘inclusive and equitable quality education’ and of achieving literacy and numeracy for youth and adults. The goals also emphasized the elimination of educational discrimination faced by more ‘vulnerable’ groups, including Indigenous¹ peoples.

In wider discussions around educational policies and practices, a focus on adult education – specifically literacy learning aimed at youth and adults outside of compulsory schooling systems – is often overlooked (UNESCO, 2015, 2016a, 2022). While policymakers and practitioners acknowledge opportunities for literacy and lifelong learning as critical for economic and human development, political engagement, and democracy (Kalman, 2005; United Nations, 2020). However, there is no internationally agreed right to education for adults, only strong recommendations to incorporate more explicit clauses in relation to adult learning in national and international education policies (UNESCO, 2015). Despite this recognition, national rates of investment in adult education and literacy remain stagnant, even in countries where educational disparities among youth and adults remain significant (Biao, 2022; Robinson, 2016; UNESCO, 2022).

To address the global issue of literacy, it is increasingly necessary to understand whether and how adults engage with literacy learning opportunities and the extent to which different interventions respond to

their needs, which often differ across time and place. Equally, there is a need further unpack and understand some of the many ways in which systems and institutions of education remain sites of considerable tension and exclusion, particularly for Indigenous groups in the post-colonial global South (Hall and Patrinos, 2012; Stromquist, 2004). Evidence continues to demonstrate education’s links to colonial, assimilationist, and homogenizing histories (Bereketeab, 2020; de Sousa Santos, 2016; De Varennes and Kuzborska, 2016), further marginalizing Indigenous peoples, languages, epistemologies, and ontologies from wider debates around quality in education (McCarty, 2012; Nakata, 2013; UNESCO, 2016b).

This study aims to delve into this context, with an emphasis on the role of literacy in the Bilingual Indigenous Education Model for Life and Work (MIB) in Mexico which targets Indigenous language speakers over the age of fifteen. The insights about the meanings, values, and uses attached to literacies in this context are especially relevant, given UNESCO’s recent International Year of Indigenous Languages (2019) and the ongoing Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032) (UNESCO, 2021).

1.1. Background and context

Achieving educational equality is especially pertinent within the Mexican context, given the country’s complex and longstanding debates about how to enhance educational provision for the many distinct Indigenous groups. With 364 language variants identified by the

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¹ In an effort to acknowledge and legitimize diverse and distinct Indigenous identities, I employ the capitalized term ‘Indigenous’ throughout the text. This style is also in line with current APA guidelines on non-biased language.

National Institute of Indigenous Languages (2008) still spoken to date, Mexico remains one of the most diverse countries in the Latin American region. Even though current national laws such as the General Law of Indigenous Peoples' Linguistic Rights (2003) and international agreements such as the International Labor Organization's Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (1989) mandate that Indigenous education should be intercultural, inclusive, and respectful of diversity, more formalized approaches to Indigenous education have often been conceived and implemented from a mainstream, Eurocentric, and Spanish language perspective (Jiménez Naranjo and Mendoza Zuany, 2012; Ramírez Castañeda, 2006; UNESCO, 2012). In Mexico, Spanish – and increasingly, English – is considered essential for improved employment prospects, and it remains the dominant language in government, media, institutions, and most public services, a reality that continues to contribute to the decline in the usage of Indigenous languages (Hernández Zamora, 2018).

Despite reported reductions in so-called 'illiteracy' rates² and an increase in the average years of schooling in Mexico (INEGI, 2020; World Bank, 2020), ongoing issues related to a shortage of qualified teachers, a chronic scarcity of resources, inadequate infrastructure, gender inequality, and the predominant use of Spanish as the main language of instruction remain some of the key challenges in the educational landscape. Moreover, these issues tend to be more pronounced in rural areas with higher proportions of Indigenous peoples, many of which were exacerbated following the widespread disruptions to education provision due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Dietz and Mateos Cortés, 2021).

A renewed framework of policies and programs aimed at expanding educational provision in Mexico led to the establishment of the National Institute for Adult Education (INEA) in 1981. In 2000, the Educational Model for Life and Work (MEVyT) was introduced as part of this new approach to better address to the educational needs of young people and adults who, for various reasons, could not participate in or complete their basic schooling within the formal education system (Torres, 2009). In 2007, INEA launched the Indigenous Bilingual MEVyT (or MIB) with the aim of opening an access route to basic education for Indigenous language speaking adults. Described as an open, integrated, flexible, and non-formal educational model, the MIB is focused on providing basic literacy and life skills training in native (or mother tongue) languages (UNESCO, 2012). Using a modular curriculum design, the program introduces Spanish as a second language only after a learner has successfully completed two basic literacy modules in their respective Indigenous language. Other specialized modules, specific to different regions and subjects, also incorporate some activities in Indigenous languages (Bracho and Martínez, 2007; INEA, 2018a). It is estimated that over 100,000 learners working with basic literacy materials in approximately 60 languages have engaged in the MIB program (Hanemann, 2017; INEA, 2018b).

The MIB model has gained global recognition since its launch, even receiving the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize for its contributions to mother-tongue literacy education and training (UNESCO, 2011). Despite this acknowledgment, research around the MIB program remains scarce, and prior to this study, there were no targeted explorations on the role and significance of literacy from the perspectives of learners and facilitators directly involved with the program. This study seeks to fill this gap by bringing together key insights into a contemporary literacy intervention in the global South and framing them within a theoretical perspective that views literacy as a social practice (Street, 2016). The study is guided by the following research questions:

² According to the Mexican national census, a person's literacy status is determined by their ability to read and write a note. However, the methodological background made available by the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics (INEGI) does not specify whether this is strictly in Spanish or if it includes Indigenous languages.

- 1) What are the meanings, values, and uses attached to literacy, according to the participants of the MIB program?
- 2) How do participants perceive literacy and processes of literacy learning in relation to their lived experiences as Indigenous adults in Mexico?

2. Literacy in and through development

Widespread and universal literacy, often highlighted in the literature as "a key determinant of well-being, social entitlement, and human development" (Maddox, 2008, p. 1), has garnered attention for its purported connections to enhanced political participation and economic advancement (Collins and Blot, 2003; Prinsloo and Breier, 1996). Tools such as the Human Development Index have also placed adult and youth literacy rates and educational attainment at the center of measurements of social welfare (UNDP, 2020), while illiteracy has been considered as a key marker of social injustice (Sen, 2003; Street, 2011; Stromquist, 2004). While policymakers and practitioners do not dispute the role of literacy in and through development, scholars such as Bartlett (2008, p. 737) have critiqued many of the universalizing narratives around literacy and its "impact" by arguing that literacy alone does not have an effect, but rather people use and assert literacy practices to different ends.

In the case of Mexico, overall literacy rates have risen dramatically over the course of only a few decades, with the national literacy rate estimated at 95% (World Bank, 2020). Nevertheless, reports on the widespread advancement of literacy still tend to use school enrolment rates as a proxy for overall literacy rates, with a continued concentration on primary through upper secondary schooling and little attention to the learning opportunities available for youth and adults outside of the formal system. Furthermore, there remains limited consideration of how sociocultural and political forces can determine whether, how, and why people choose to engage in literacy learning (Bartlett, 2008).

This chronic inattention towards adult education and literacy learning led to a range of responses from grassroots movements, NGOs, religious organizations, and others aiming to 'reduce' or 'eradicate' illiteracy in Mexico and across Latin America from early 20th century onwards. Large-scale literacy campaigns and popular education movements targeted at out-of-school youth and adults gained popularity, with certain models such as Cuba's 'Yo, Sí Puedo' (Yes, I Can) gaining international attention (Hanemann, 2015a). However, the results of such interventions and campaigns remained disparate and often produced mixed results, with many of them still failing to consider the growing evidence that literacy by itself (or de-linked from social structures, power, local languages, and traditions, among other factors) does not automatically bring about swift economic improvement (Bartlett, 2008; Coulmas and Guerini, 2012; Torres, 2009). Moreover, educational campaigns have, at times, been leveraged as a mechanism to promote certain political or religious agendas, with reported results serving to evidence 'development' but with lingering concerns regarding the continuity and sustainability of different interventions (Hanemann, 2015b). These concerns highlight the urgent need to understand more deeply the role of literacies as embedded in processes of social change and international development, to better "account for the role of literate (and illiterate) identities and practices in shaping social relations, capacities, and aspirations" (Basu et al., 2008, p. 769).

3. Methods

The data in the study includes a collection of first-hand participant accounts that were part of a larger, multi-sited research project in the Mexican states of Campeche, Oaxaca, and San Luis Potosí that spanned from 2017 to 2021 (Sánchez Tyson, 2021). In dialogue and collaboration with the INEA state offices and their local liaisons, I visited 15 different Indigenous communities over the course of three months in late 2018, where I invited learners and facilitators engaged in the MIB program to

voluntarily share their experiences in relation to literacy learning in any of the five predominant languages of the region (in this case, Maya, Ch'ol, Mazatec, Tének and Náhuatl) and in Spanish. A total of 25 individual interviews, 9 group interviews, and over 30 h of MIB study circle observations were conducted. Interviews were primarily conducted in Spanish, with the exception of group interviews, which were conducted using a mix of Spanish and the participants' respective Indigenous language variant. In such instances, the local facilitators provided real-time interpretation support. While this interpretation process may have influenced the comprehensiveness of the group discussion data, it added an interactive and collaborative element into these discussions, enhancing them through the shared input of participants.

To ensure that the participants' voices remain connected to a specific temporal, spatial, and sociocultural context, extracts in later sections are linked to the municipalities where the discussions occurred and the primary languages spoken by the participants. For confidentiality purposes, all participant names have been anonymized. By presenting the findings according to participant perspectives on the meanings, values, and uses attached to literacies, I acknowledge that the findings may not fully capture the more nuanced regional and local distinctions that might shape and influence participants' views. Nevertheless, my aim was to engage with and present the data in a coherent manner and by the most salient themes in relation to the research questions.

I adopted critical ethnographic strategies in the field to contribute to and build upon the existing field of ethnographic research on literacy in the global South from a social justice perspective (Bartlett, 2007a; Boon, 2019; Maddox, 2007; Meyers, 2011; North, 2013; Papen, 2005; Prins, 2010; Robinson-Pant, 2000; Street, 2016, 2011). In addition, I drew from an Indigenous research agenda for data generation and analysis, an approach that emphasizes inquiry as a dual political and moral endeavor within a distinctive historical context, grounded in the principles of intercultural dialogue and with an underpinning goal of social justice that recenters and values Indigenous knowledges (Denzin and Lincoln, 2014; Nakata, 2013; Smith, 2012). With regards to adopting this type of agenda, Smith (2012) outlined various principles or 'projects' designed to challenge prevailing structures and norms in theory, policy, and practice. These projects include including claiming, testimonies, and reframing Indigenous experiences and knowledges. Consequently, I considered these principles as methodological strategies for data analysis and as a means to bear witness to the experiences and counter-narratives that were shared.

As such, this study seeks to critically engage with questions around social justice and support collaborative processes of knowledge co-construction by foregrounding and establishing Indigenous voices while simultaneously recognizing the inherent tensions that come with 'doing' research in Indigenous contexts (Smith, 2012; Spivak, 2010). Considering myself an "active creator" in the process (Thomas, 1993, p. 42), I followed a relational and reflexive approach throughout the research and analysis, continually questioning my position within the different contexts and examining whether or how various dynamics of my own background, identity, subjectivities, and assumptions influenced the way data was generated and interpreted. Navigating and negotiating my position in the field, I came to locate myself as an "inbetweener" (Milligan, 2016, p. 237) with some 'insider' perspectives (as a person born and raised in Mexico who is familiar with the INEA system as a former learner and facilitator) and 'outsider' markers (as a person affiliated with a higher education institution in the UK who does not self-identify as Indigenous or speak any of the five languages in the regions visited). Rather than attempt to distance myself from these tensions and limitations, I openly acknowledge them as part of the ongoing and dialectic process of social inquiry that considers more pluralistic understandings of knowing, being, and doing (Nakata, 2013) and encourages non-Indigenous researchers to unsettle assumptions, be aware of power differentials, consider multilingual and multivocal texts, and contribute to the ongoing project of decolonizing methodologies and qualitative research practices (Lincoln and González y González,

2008).

3.1. Theoretical framework

The theoretical frame of literacy as a social practice (LSP) is interwoven throughout the analysis. Building on the foundations of 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS), a term introduced by Street (1984, 2013) and embraced by numerous scholars since the 1980 s, the social practice perspective presented a paradigm shift away from perceiving literacy as merely an individual attribute or skill. Instead, it has evolved to regard literacy practices as connected to and embedded in 'different social, political, economic and religious realities' (Kalman, 2005, p. 9). Research in this field also gave rise to a renewed understanding of literacy not as a single analytical unit, but rather as having multiple practices that vary in relation to time, space, and power structures (Brandt, 2001). Recent scholarship has shifted towards a wider use of LSP to emphasize the multiple and varied contexts and users of literacy, rather than solely focusing on a field of study itself (Burnett et al., 2014).

Understood in this context as the sociological perspective that sees literacy as embedded in power relations and shaped by socio-political structures, LSP provided a theoretical basis for addressing the key research questions that guided this study. An LSP approach also allowed for a broader exploration of the plural nature of literacies, what people do with them, and the different ways and dimensions in which people understand, negotiate, and contest them. Moreover, examining the experiences of those engaged in a specific educational model through an LSP lens helped to better understand how literacies considered for and targeted at Indigenous adults are bound up with questions of power, inequality, inclusion, and exclusion.

4. The what, where, how, and why of literacies

The various framings of literacies presented across the next sections range from the general to the more contextual, the conceptual to the practical, and at times involve an analysis of literacies through different metaphors. The range of situated interactions and engagements with literacies include examples of lived experiences both within and outside the MIB program. For the most part, participants did not differentiate these understandings in terms of which language was used in which situations; rather, they tended to vary depending on the specific context. As a result, the overlapping ideas on and around literacies reveal new insights into some of the ways in which participants assigned importance, values, usefulness, or merit to reading and writing, in both their respective Indigenous languages and in Spanish.

4.1. 'A defense'

Exploring the topic of literacies within the context of the MIB program as well as in participants' everyday lives was, in many ways, an avenue for broader discussions around the dialectical relationship between diverse conceptions of literacies and their multifaceted social surroundings. These were analyzed both from within the boundaries of the program and through a wider socio-historical and political backdrop, suggesting patterns in terms of perceptions of literacies as a guard against vulnerabilities, both structural and embodied. When prompted to think about the role and meaning of literacy, a facilitator named Patricia offered a view of what she considered the underpinning purpose of literacy learning:

Learning to read and write is to defend yourself in life as it leads you along ... I imagine that it's a defense against everything that comes ... to learn to read and write, it's to defend yourself. (Patricia, Calakmul facilitator, Ch'ol speaker).

Patricia's characterization of reading and writing as a lifelong 'defense' suggests that, at least at the individual level, literacy learning may

serve as a form of social safeguarding and that literacies could add a layer of protection and offer a means for self-advocacy and empowerment. This notion was further expanded upon by a learner named Dora:

What if a paper arrives ... or a letter, or a, any paper, and we can't read it? And if others, if other people are going to read it ... suppose you got a report of something. But what if that's not it? Or you got something that says you owe money. What if you don't? ... It's important, well, that we know how to read. (Dora, San Martín learner, Náhuatl speaker).

In her analysis, Dora presented various scenarios illustrating how an individual's capacity to read and comprehend diverse texts could influence potential situations of vulnerability, such as falling prey to financial scams. This aspect of Dora's critical inquiry aligned with Patricia's exploration of how literacies could serve as a protective 'defense'. Moreover, Dora's example of encountering papers, reports, or other documents without the ability to independently verify their content emphasized the disadvantage of having to depend on others for comprehension. A facilitator named Paola provided a similar perspective on the matter:

[Not knowing how to read or write is] something that will hold you back ... for example, in situations where your son or daughter may have gone away to work and is going to send you money. How are you going to get that money if you don't even know how you're going to sign? ... That means you have to depend on someone else. (Paola, Aquismón facilitator, Tének speaker).

The observations made by both Patricia and Dora regarding the significance of utilizing literacies for self-reliance were reinforced by the concept of 'depending on someone else' in certain situations involving reading, writing, and providing signatures. Paola's example illustrated that this act of dependence could carry inherent risks and have significant implications, especially concerning safe access to remittances.

Further examination of the interconnected discussions on defense and (in)dependence in relation to literacies revealed a potential conflict between individualistic perspectives (not depending on anyone else) and the conceptual continuity of "living harmoniously" and the desire for positive community interdependence among Indigenous groups (Mato, 2016, p. 230). Simultaneously, patterns of mistrust and skepticism towards external entities, institutions, politicians, and even researchers are understandable when considering the historical injustices of discrimination in education, land dispossession, marginalization, and exploitation endured by Indigenous peoples in Mexico and beyond (Smith, 2012; Stavenhagen, 2015). These connections indicate that issues of trust, be it in people, institutions, authorities, or more, continue to persist among Indigenous communities, and is consonant with previous research in Latin America considering literacy as a defense (Ames, 2013; Zavala, 2002).

A learner named Adriana made a general comment about vulnerability and offered a potential basis for the underpinning mistrust, linking this to her personal observations:

Someone who doesn't know how to read, write, or do math, really, people just take advantage of us ... that's what I've noticed. (Adriana, Aquismón learner, Tének speaker).

While Adriana did not offer explicit examples of how she or others had been 'taken advantage' of, her statement emphasized the protective nature of literacies and numeracies. She drew a connection between an individual's capability to engage with reading, writing, or numeracy and the potential negative outcomes of ill-treatment or exploitation. A facilitator named Celia built on this theme by suggesting that one's level of vulnerability was often correlated to their literacy level:

They [the learners in her MIB study circle] tell me, "I'd like to ... learn to read". Why? So that tomorrow I don't just sign any document ... I don't want anyone to take advantage of me. Why? Because mainly, I want to learn. Because, well, I don't want anyone to make me sign any paper. (Celia, Huautla facilitator, Mazatec speaker).

Similarly, another facilitator named Gaby commented on the importance of understanding documents requiring signatures to prevent patterns of discrimination:

For example, you come and [ask me to] sign a paper ... First, I have to read to be able to sign it ... that's why for me it's very important, because that way no one can trick you. (Gaby, Calakmul facilitator, Ch'ol speaker).

The MIB participants' accounts of not wanting to be 'taken advantage of' or 'tricked' reinforced the prevailing sense of mistrust and the subsequent necessity for a 'defense'. Specifically, their perceptions of vulnerability appeared closely linked to situations involving paperwork and signatures, indicating that interactions with institutional and government entities remain fraught with tensions. Whereas the previous examples discussed individual vulnerability in more practical terms, a facilitator named Paola discussed a similar yet broader notion of defenselessness by invoking a metaphor of being physically constrained:

I mean, if you can't read, if you don't know how to write, your hands are tied, right? Because there are people who don't know how old they are. Yeah? They don't know when they were born. There are people who can't write their names. They can't write their signature. (Paola, Aquismón facilitator, Tének speaker).

Paola's metaphor of not knowing how to read and write as being akin to having 'your hands tied' helped to highlight some of the fundamental ways in which people are often expected to engage with a range of literacies to access, navigate, and understand contemporary bureaucracies to be able to participate more fully in their communities, to avoid exclusion, and to assert their basic rights as citizens. Two other learners spoke of similar limitations, highlighting practical examples of needing numeracy skills and being unable to help their child with homework while also making use of embodied metaphors:

There are people here who don't even know [how to identify] 50 cents, okay? ... It's as if ... our eyes are covered. (Raúl, Tampacán learner, Náhuatl speaker).

There were times when my daughter was little ... she told me, *Mamá*, help me with my homework. But if you don't know the letters, and I don't know them either, we're both blind. (Norma, Calkiní learner, Maya speaker).

Both Raul and Norma's remarks conveyed feelings of helplessness and frustration, shedding light on the perceived obstacles arising from their limited literacy and numeracy skills in their daily lives. Their metaphors of 'tied hands', 'covered eyes', and being 'blind' suggested an underlying notion that individual constraints (such as the inability to write a signature, recognize currency, or assist their child with homework) and the perceived necessity for literacies emerged from situations where personal protection and safeguarding were crucial. In essence, the ability to fully comprehend and engage in activities like signing documents, managing finances, and supporting their children's education presented diverse reasons for their pursuit of literacy learning "as a way to avoid deception and minimize shame" (Prins, 2010, p. 425).

These insights revealed the significant impact of limited literacy and numeracy on individuals' sense of agency and dignity. Although participants did not specify whether the association of literacy with defense was more closely linked to engagements with literacy in Spanish or Indigenous languages, the prevalence of Spanish across state and

institutional contexts suggests that in this case, notions of defense were more often linked to Spanish-language interactions (such as when reading and signing official documents or receiving remittances). Overall, participant views suggest that being able to better navigate literacies within and across multilingual contexts could support learners to participate in their communities and assert their basic rights as citizens more fully (Prins, 2010).

4.2. 'A necessity'

Following up on literacies as they relate to an individual's ability to engage with various formal institutions and access various services, a portrayal of literacies as necessary for everyday life also emerged from the discussions with participants. Graciela, a facilitator, provided an example:

It's a necessity for them [the learners] ... because the [conditional cash transfer] PROSPERA program is here. Sometimes they give them the appointments. That day, on a certain date you have to go to the medical appointment. Sometimes they forget ... the one who doesn't know anything [about reading and writing], well, they're not going to know what day, what date their appointment is. (Graciela, Calakmul facilitator, Ch'ol speaker).

In this context, Graciela contextualized the 'necessity' of reading and writing in more localized and practical terms. Simple tasks such as reading appointment reminders or marking dates on a calendar could have significant consequences, as they could mean the difference between receiving essential medical check-ups or missing them altogether. Moreover, missed appointments could be perceived as non-compliance within what at the time of the research was a widespread conditional cash transfer program (since replaced for cash scholarships and pensions). This perceived usefulness of literacies was further detailed by a learner named Adriana:

[Reading and writing are] useful for a lot of things. To do math ... to write little letters to my children, who don't live here ... so that when we go to buy something, they don't look down on us. (Adriana, Aquismón learner, Tének speaker).

Adriana's insights into the practical applications of reading and writing came together on a broader scale when she emphasized their potential to disrupt patterns of discrimination and reduce the likelihood of others 'looking down' on individuals who face challenges with deploying literacy or numeracy in everyday situations. Her example of the role of writing to be able to communicate with family who lived outside the immediate community was supported by another facilitator named Liliana who recounted a similar experience:

There was a *señora* [woman] in another community where I also give classes. The *señora* wrote her son a letter ... so, we were seeing how knowing how to read and knowing how to write is good for a lot of things. (Liliana, San Martín facilitator, Náhuatl speaker).

Liliana elaborated on various everyday instances where reading and writing proved 'useful' in conveying messages. She cited leaving notes on her refrigerator to inform her family about her arrival time or instructing her children on when to heat tortillas for lunch. Beyond providing these practical examples of literacy and numeracy interactions, she recognized how the usefulness of literacies extended to encompass people's responsibilities within and towards their communities. More specifically, she highlighted the role of literacies when carrying out the duties necessary to fulfill community *cargos* (responsibilities or roles), thereby making reference to local governance practices that remain prevalent in many Indigenous communities (Weinberg, 2007). Liliana elaborated on this further:

Sometimes when they give them some *cargo* [responsibility] in the community and they have to write, they have to read, and they have to go to meetings where they ... [tell them] now, you take this back to your community. (Liliana, San Martín facilitator, Náhuatl speaker).

In another study circle, a learner named Raúl highlighted a specific example of how reading and writing official correspondence was a common and important element of his *cargo* responsibilities:

If we don't know anything, not even a number, for example ... if a letter comes to us, well, we won't know. And sometimes I'm struggling there, and I'm looking at the letter and I do a double take. And that's when I ask my daughter and my grandson, 'Hey, what does it say here?' (Raúl, Tampacán learner, Náhuatl speaker).

During the visits to various localities, a prominent observation was the persistence of a customary governance system that coexists with the federal and state electoral system. In many cases, it seemed to influence perspectives on the need for and importance of literacies and served to shape attitudes on possibilities for practical learning outcomes as a result of participating in the MIB program.

4.3. 'Access to full knowledge'

A notable discussion that surfaced concerning the potentials of literacy revolved around the concept of knowledge and the various ways that it is defined, accessed, understood, and negotiated. While the term knowledge itself invites a wider conceptual debate beyond the scope of this paper, the issue of knowledge was introduced by a facilitator named Marcos in terms of accessibility:

As far as reading ... it's access to full knowledge, to an experience ... Let's suppose in a book, we don't know, we're not in the area of that event. But through a reading, I mean, we find out what's happening out there. So that's why reading leads us to know what's happening inside or outside. (Marcos, Tampacán facilitator, Náhuatl speaker).

In this context, Marcos' insights regarding 'access to full knowledge' prompted inquiries into what constitutes 'full' knowledge to begin with, who defines it, and for what purposes. Although Marcos did not elaborate further on this remark, he implied that reading could serve as a means to learn about the broader social world (outside) as well as about a bounded community (inside). Additionally, his comments resonated with ongoing discussions and debates in the literature concerning literacy's dual nature as both globally situated (outside) and locally embedded (inside).

Discussing access to 'full knowledge' in Indigenous contexts quickly becomes entangled with issues of power dynamics. Viewing knowledge as a "multidimensional body of understandings" and recognizing the historical perception of Indigenous knowledge as "inferior and primitive" highlights that contemporary knowledge-generating practices are far from neutral (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 2014, p. 135). In the context of the MIB program, knowledge could be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it could be seen through the lens of its institutional and instrumental purposes, considering that it is a government-led program and thus influenced by government interests. However, secondly, exploring knowledge from the perspective of MIB learners and facilitators illustrates how it goes beyond attainment purposes and becomes a tool for expansive and (trans)formative processes and experiences of knowledge creation and contestation. As an example, a learner named Alejandro articulated his motivations to join the MIB program in a way that signaled a desire to be able to read and write to 'understand' the wider world:

Someone who just ... doesn't read, doesn't study ... there's nothing to, to move you, to give you an idea to do something ... I want to

learn. But I want to learn, like, learn not just by writing it down, no. I want it ... to stay in my head ... I want to understand what it says. I tell you, we're really stupid ... we can't remember ... we forget ... they need to repeat over and over until it sticks ... For you to know well, you need time ... If a facilitator teaches well until it sticks ... just so they learn a little bit ... then the person is, well, is conscious. You know ... what he does, or what he says, or what he wants to do ... That's how one, well, becomes more ... more awake. (Alejandro, Aquismón learner, Tének speaker).

While Alejandro displayed awareness of the significant time investment required in the literacy learning process, he also tended to attribute his perceived lack of progress to personal shortcomings. He believed that instances of 'not remembering' and 'forgetting' validated his self-judgment as being 'stupid'. As a result, variations and discontinuities in the literacy learning journey could become demoralizing rather than motivational for some learners. Despite this, Alejandro expressed determination for literacy learning to 'stick' with him, referring to a figurative future state of heightened consciousness or becoming 'more awake'. These reflexive and meta-cognitive processes align with Marcos' ideas of achieving 'full knowledge' through literacies, thus generating clear associations between reading, writing, understanding, and questioning the broader world.

4.4. A way to 'express myself'

Throughout the interviews, literacies were discussed in relation to both the constraining and unleashing of self-expression and associated psychosocial effects. Notably, there were significant examples of shifts in attitudes and the development of confidence due to literacy learning. This observation prompted an investigation into how participants utilized literacies to articulate their thoughts, opinions, and emotions.

Pilar provided a description of shifts in attitudes that she had noticed in the learners who attended her study circle:

When I learned to read and write, it feels really nice. It feels nice to express yourself ... The *señoras* [women] that I work with ... they express themselves and they say, I feel really good with myself, I feel good learning to read and write. Not like before, they rejected me, I mean, they insulted me because I couldn't read what was written on a poster ... [Literacy is to] feel good about ourselves as people, [as a] human being, and to, well, teach your children how to read and write too. (Pilar, Calakmul facilitator, Ch'ol speaker).

Here, Pilar explicitly linked a metaphorical 'before' (associated with not knowing) to experiences of rejection and insults, and an 'after' (linked to knowing) of being able to 'express themselves' and feel 'good with myself'. While Pilar's description of learner transitions from a 'before' time (marked by social rejection) to a 'now' time (with increased confidence) is broad, she attributed the ability to read and write directly to one's self-esteem, using her own example as evidence. Moreover, Pilar emphasized that literacy has the potential to positively impact others, making them 'feel good' about themselves.

Expanding on examples of people facing 'rejection' or being 'insulted' due to their reported inability to read or write, Pilar touched upon the notion of learners being hesitant, and sometimes even fearful, to fully engage with the MIB program for various reasons:

The benefits [of the MIB] are that, that the learners learn to read and write, to express themselves, well, without fear. Without, without fear of, well, to express what they feel. Because I've seen, well, in several people who don't want to read, they don't want to learn, because well, they're afraid that, that it's not, it's not correct ... Because we only, well, here, it's only Ch'ol what we speak. Mostly they don't use Spanish. (Pilar, Calakmul facilitator, Ch'ol speaker).

Such recounted experiences of 'fear' in expressing feelings or

thoughts underscored that processes of reading and writing are never neutral in contexts where one language holds dominance over others. Adding to a broader sense of trepidation was Pilar's estimation that some people 'don't want to learn' due to the fear that what they might speak and write would not be 'correct' because 'here, it's only Ch'ol that we speak'. In other words, Pilar was suggesting that for some, the Ch'ol language could be perceived as incorrect by its very nature because it was not Spanish.

Pilar's description of the significance of reading and writing, both in dominant and non-dominant languages, as a potential avenue for self-expression 'without fear' became crucial to understanding Francisco's subsequent comment about people 'daring' to manifest nascent ways of expression through writing:

When they start working [in the study circles] ... we start to observe that there are a lot of things that they keep to themselves, okay? There are a lot of things they keep to themselves. So, when you have knowledge of the letters, of *la palabra* [the word], the person dares to manifest it in writing, to manifest it by speaking it in a correct way ... and when they dare to write, it's because they want to say something. They want to communicate. (Francisco, Calkin' facilitator, Maya speaker).

In the context of the study circles, freely expressing oneself through writing or speaking was depicted as a radical and courageous act, personified by Indigenous identities navigating both their Indigenous language(s) and Spanish. Pilar's use of the term 'fear' externalized what Francisco alluded to but did not explicitly state: that fear itself appeared to be a driver for many Indigenous learners, not to seek opportunities to read and write, but rather to 'keep to themselves' and suppress or deny their own ability to speak their minds due to concerns of social retribution and shaming. Further feelings of fear were mentioned not only in terms of self-expression but in embodied terms as well, as described by Guadalupe:

I read kind of slow, but I do read a little, yeah ... like right now, my hand could move a bit. Today I couldn't write anymore, it was shaking a lot ... [earlier] it felt okay to move my hand. so my hand won't be scared to write. (Guadalupe, Aquismón learner, Tének speaker).

Guadalupe's descriptions of a physical manifestation of 'fear', such as her hand 'shaking a lot', and a more abstract sense of her hand being 'scared to write', revealed a compounded anxiety related to reading and writing. It also demonstrated her self-awareness of her own apprehension when engaging with literacy learning materials. However, she also hinted at times when this fear lessened, explaining that despite her perceived slow reading pace, she could still read. In this way, Guadalupe unintentionally acknowledged her progression in literacy learning, despite her expressed feelings of fear.

Additional reflections by Adriana offered another example of how even when learners recognize their own advancements in literacy learning, they may still experience embarrassment and doubt about their ability to express themselves effectively:

Little by little, that's how I learned. I'm still, well, I'm ashamed to say some things. And right now, I sort of. I can't express myself very well. The little, what I've understood is what I'm using today ... to learn, even if I can't express myself very well ... even though my letters aren't very pretty, but that's what I do. (Adriana, Aquismón learner, Tének speaker).

Adriana conveyed her experience in a tentative manner, acknowledging that she had learned something since joining the study circle, though she felt it was 'not very much'. She indicated that she could write, but her 'letters aren't very pretty'. However, what stood out was her eagerness to learn, despite her belief that she could not express

herself 'very well'. These feelings of fear and related instances of internalized self-censorship described by the participants resonated with the paradigms of deficit, disadvantage, and diminished or constrained self-expression highlighted in previous studies related to adult education contexts (Acharya et al., 2019; Aikman et al., 2016; Bartlett, 2007a; Hamilton and Pitt, 2011; Hanemann, 2019; Rogers and Street, 2012).

Furthermore, the interconnected narratives surrounding literacies and self-expression echoed Freire's argument that learning to read and write involves processes of reflection and action that are "associated with the right of self-expression and world-expression, of creating and re-creating, of deciding and choosing and ultimately participating in society's historical process" (Freire, 1970, p. 212). From a Freirean perspective, to deny or undermine the existence of ethnolinguistic diversity would thereby mean denying different forms of self-expression, which in turn could arguably weaken the social and political foundations of a country like Mexico and others with similar histories of exclusion (Nettle and Romaine, 2000).

4.5. A way to 'learn from one another'

Another emerging pattern in discussions on literacies placed the instances and opportunities of mutual learning at the heart of the MIB study circles. The exchange of ideas and experiences as a result of convening for study circle sessions emerged as an aspect of the program which carried equal importance to the related educational gains or results. Liliana shared how she often reiterated the aspect of coming together as a community (known as *convivencia* in Spanish) in the study circles to promote program engagement when inviting new individuals to join the study circle she facilitated:

When I go out to invite them [to the study circle], I tell them that, well, that it's to *convivir* ... They come to learn to write, to read, they come to *convivir* ... I have a celebration for them when it's, I don't know, Mother's Day. We have a *convivio* [celebration together]. Or if it's Father's Day ... Or if it's Grandparents Day ... And there, they're learning various things ... they share their experiences. (Liliana, San Martín facilitator, Náhuatl speaker).

Testimonies regarding opportunities to share diverse experiences and learn from one another demonstrate how the MIB study circles served as a point of encounter for more than reading and writing within the bounds of a specific program. Liliana's emphasis on the sharing of experiences and mutual learning aligns with the concept of *convivencia*. While there is no single word in English that directly translates this term, it can be roughly interpreted as learning to live together and foster community through "reciprocity, relationship building, and interdependence" (Solano-Campos, 2013, p. 621). For Liliana, the MIB program often served as an organizing space where participants could gain more than just literacy skills; it also provided opportunities for community-building. To provide further insight into what *convivencia* meant within the MIB contexts visited, a field note highlighted it as a set of values and principles guiding interactions and relationships within the study circles:

[Francisco] said ... "We generate values, values of *convivencia*". He said he fosters these values of *convivencia* [in the MIB study circles] because they're being forgotten. He said that Indigenous people tend to disappear in favor of individualism instead of community. (Field note, 4 October 2018).

Building on the idea of interdependence, the notion of *convivencia* and its association with harmonious living in a mutually respectful environment aligns with the axiological approach of interculturality, which emphasizes dialogue and community. In contrast, the increasingly prevalent placement of individual interests over collective ones, as reflected in many Northern countries' largely capitalistic economic systems, is at odds with many Indigenous communities which tend to

prioritize relationality, reciprocity, and interconnectedness (Bishop et al., 2019; Walsh, 2012).

Determining whether and to what extent MIB learners consider the mutual support aspects of the study circles crucial to their involvement poses challenges. Nevertheless, Yesenia, one of the learners, offered an example of how positive mutual interactions influenced her ongoing participation as much as the opportunity to read and write in her native language did:

I really liked it. More than anything, there are *convivios* sometimes ... there, we spend time together, and sometimes we even play ... during these times that I've come, I've liked it a lot. More than anything, to *convivir* with them and to learn Náhuatl more. (Yesenia, Tampacán learner, Náhuatl speaker).

In addition to the study circles being described as spaces where people could convene and celebrate holidays and special occasions, Norma emphasized the ways in which the study circles helped to carry on community traditions:

What we do here in the community, we do, well, celebrations. Celebrations on the Día de San José, the Day of the Dead, and various things. Yeah, we do something and, well, *convivimos* [we share and celebrate together] ... That's the tradition that we have here ... That's what our communities are like. (Norma, Calkiní learner, Maya speaker).

For these learners, the MIB spaces appeared to serve as conduits for mutual learning and sharing that went beyond the confines of institutional texts or the expected outcomes of passing exams or obtaining educational certificates. Consequently, it can be argued that a significant strength of the MIB program lies in its incorporation of *convivencia* elements adapted to the unique interests and needs of each community.

5. Conclusions

This study responded to questions around the role of literacies and experiences of literacy learning from the perspective of learners and facilitators participating in the MIB program in Mexico. Discussions with learners and facilitators highlighted the most salient meanings, values, and uses attached to literacies through a series of framings of literacy as a defense, a necessity, a way to have access to full knowledge, a way to express oneself, a way to learn from one another, and a way to know one's rights. While these findings are not intended to overshadow other potential understandings of literacies in Indigenous contexts, the empirical perspectives generate and deepen new theoretical and practical understandings on the role and meaning of literacies, particularly for Indigenous adult learners in the Mexican context.

The individual and collective relationships with literacies, produced and enacted through specific life and cultural histories, were also found to be closely linked to a wide variety of uses ranging from everyday practical usages (for example, to read a letter) to more abstract ones (to feel better about oneself or to carry on traditions). Participants reified how literacies are deeply intertwined with power relations through recounted experiences and fears of being 'insulted', 'tricked', and 'taken advantage of'. While such vulnerabilities can happen across different marginalized groups due to a range of socio-economic and cultural factors, the ongoing stigmatization of illiteracy and histories of exclusion in education for Indigenous groups in particular remains a heightened concern (UNESCO, 2021).

The data also emphasized different forms of agentic action in the face of ongoing barriers and discrimination. Participant perspectives on literacy learning as a 'defense' and as a way to 'express oneself' arguably highlighted some of the agentic and aspirational dimensions of literacies in both instrumental and symbolic ways (Rogers and Street, 2012). Mentions of utility in terms of using numeracy for daily tasks or writing letters to family members or descriptions of wanting to improve reading

and writing skills to better fulfill roles in the community demonstrated how literacies (in both Indigenous languages and Spanish) can – and often do – adapt to individual and community needs, regardless of whether or how literacy materials from any given program are developed or promoted.

Such localized examples of some of the more instrumental purposes of literacies paired with some of its more symbolic potentials suggest further links to self-confidence and identity building through mutual interaction (Bartlett, 2007b). Discussions concerning how participants perceived the MIB study circles as a way to ‘learn from one another’ highlighted some of the key aspects of the collaborative and interpersonal dimensions of literacy. For some learners, experiences of learning and sharing together made possible through the MIB study circles were seen as a key motivator and a way to (re)connect with others in their community through shared activities, traditions, and other celebrations, supporting wider theorizations about the (inter)relational potentials of adult literacy learning spaces (Nusse, 2021; Prins, 2010).

While there cannot be any guarantees that adult education learning spaces by themselves can or will lead to specific social benefits, the findings of this study support the argument that to size up any given adult literacy interventions primarily against their economic potentials would be to downplay or disregard the crucial community relationships (articulated here through the concept of *convivencia*) that adult learning spaces can help to foster. As a theoretical framework, *convivencia* recognizes and emphasizes a profound interconnectedness between all people, echoing the fundamental principles of harmonious coexistence inherent in the Andean Indigenous concept of *el Buen Vivir* (or living well). This relational and ontological paradigm has also been used as a way to critique dominant structures and reimagine alternatives to “development” that prioritizes principles of peace, equality, and sustainability (Esteve, 2010; Villalba, 2013; Walsh, 2010). The counter-narratives in this study help to demonstrate how considering the meanings, values, and uses attached to literacy in a way that foregrounds the “social” in social practices of literacy might inform and enhance overall teaching and learning strategies for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous adult educators alike.

This study also reaffirms that the prioritization and perceived power of different types of literacies and languages in different societies remain deeply ingrained in discussions, debates, policies, and practices concerning educational equality (Barton et al., 2000; Kalman and Street, 2013). As a government-led program, the MIB arguably exemplifies an enduring tension between governments’ renewed emphasis on linguistic rights for Indigenous peoples and the historical and contemporary legacies of integrationist policies and discourses in education. Despite the growing recognition of the effectiveness and positive outcomes associated to learning in one’s mother tongue (Hanemann and McKay, 2019; Heugh, 2009; Robinson, 2015), many bilingual education interventions – including the MIB – still promote transitional approaches to learning whereby Indigenous languages predominantly serve as a “bridging function to the dominant language” (Hanemann, 2019, p. 4) rather than advancing additive models that value both languages as equally as resources. This underscores Street’s (2016) argument that more formal and institutionalized literacies and languages tend to undermine and delegitimize peripheral ones, thereby perpetuating social hierarchies and further diminishing the status and use of Indigenous languages (Hamel, 2017).

As such, this study emphasizes the need for more deliberate reimaginings of literacies in the field of educational development that explicitly address the existing social hierarchies and power dynamics in their respective contexts. Such a reformulation, developed collaboratively by those directly engaged in literacy learning as beneficiaries or providers, would better serve the individuals targeted by policies and interventions. Moreover, by contributing new knowledge on models of learning that acknowledge and recenter Indigenous languages and worldviews, this study highlights some of the ways in which processes of decolonization and inclusion in education can unfold in specific

Indigenous contexts.

As a final reflection, I propose that the social processes of literacies are closely intertwined with the ongoing project of Indigenous self-determination, spanning various aspects such as social, cultural, economic, and psychological realms, and involving complex processes of mobilization, decolonization, and transformation. The linkages between literacies and self-determination emerged strongly in the data, with literacy being viewed as a means of defense, self-expression, self-reliance, and the assertion and reclamation of rights – all fundamental to the project of self-determination. This suggests that on some level, and despite its transitional constraints, the MIB offered a space through which people could reflect on and reinscribe Indigenous ways of being, doing, knowing, and learning. Further investigation into other Indigenous education models and the extent to which these can adequately respond to Indigenous needs and agendas, in Mexico and beyond, is still needed. However, participant perspectives highlighted in this study contribute to an enhanced understanding of the multifaceted relationship between literacy and self-determination, further emphasizing the centrality of literacy within wider development debates.

Author statement

The author confirms sole responsibility for the manuscript preparation, including data collection, analysis and interpretation of results. The author declares that this manuscript is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere.

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