



Exploring One Colombian Adolescent's Diverse Literacies in his Rural Community

Explorando os diversos letramentos de um adolescente colombiano em sua comunidade rural

Explorando las diversas alfabetizaciones de un adolescente colombiano en su comunidad rural

Tatiana Becerra-Posada* 
Emily Mannard** 

Para citar este artículo: Becerra-Posada, T. y Mannard, E. (2024). Exploring One Colombian Adolescent's Diverse Literacies in his Rural Community. *Revista Colombiana de Educación*, (92), 258-278. <https://doi.org/10.17227/rce.num92-17131>



Recibido: 09/08/2022
Evaluado: 15/04/2023

pp. 258-278

N.º 92

* PhD Candidate, Educational Studies/Language Acquisition, McGill University. Montreal, Canada/Universidad de Córdoba, Montería, Colombia. tatianabecerra@correo.unicordoba.edu.co - tatiana.becerra@mail.mcgill.ca
** PhD Candidate, Educational Studies, McGill University. Faculty of Education, McGill University, Montreal, Canada. emily.mannard@mail.mcgill.ca

Abstract

A deficit view of rural language learners' out-of-school literacy practices has permeated formal educational and language policy globally. Intergovernmental organizations like the *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*, for instance, have often portrayed rural learners in Global South countries as having literacy deficits if their language skills are not in alignment with the practices valued in school contexts. These deficit representations are often instrumentalized as a tactic to oppress and exclude rural students' literacies and language traditions from educational policy and curricula. Throughout this article, the authors – both language educators researching young people's diverse literacy practices – aim to address and combat such problematic omissions. Following a sociocultural, multiliteracies framework, we analyzed two semi-structured interviews and accompanying artifacts to feature the literacies that a 14-year-old rural Colombian youth engages with daily. Results illuminate the myriad language practices honed outside of formal learning contexts, including family-based literacies, oral and embodied forms of communication, analyzing and composing with multimodal texts, and developing critical skills with digital texts to question national power relations and forge activist identities. The authors discussed the benefits of an expanded view of literacy – particularly for educators – in hopes of contributing to equity-based research advocating the recognition and inclusion of rural students' vernacular literacies across formal learning spaces.

Palabras clave

literacy; multiliteracies; rural education; literacy education

Keywords

alfabetização; educação do campo; multiletramentos; ensino de alfabetização

Resumo

A visão do déficit tem sido uma abordagem comum para a pesquisa sobre o letramento dos estudantes do campo, que, infelizmente, continua a permear as políticas educacionais e linguísticas em todo o mundo. Por exemplo, organizações intergovernamentais como a *Organização para Cooperação e Desenvolvimento Econômico* frequentemente retratam alunos rurais em países do Sul Global como tendo déficits de alfabetização se suas habilidades linguísticas não estiverem alinhadas com as práticas valorizadas nos contextos escolares. Essas representações de déficit são usadas contra estudantes rurais cujos letramentos continuam sendo excluídos da política educacional e dos currículos. Este estudo de caso qualitativo aborda especificamente essas representações problemáticas de déficit. Seguindo um quadro sociocultural de multiletramentos, analisamos duas entrevistas semiestruturadas e artefatos para identificar os letramentos com os quais um jovem rural se envolve diariamente. Os resultados indicam que essa juventude rural se envolve em uma miríade de letramentos que incluem a participação em formas de comunicação baseadas na família, orais e corporificadas, analisando e compondo textos multimodais para aprofundar a compreensão entre contextos e explorando habilidades digitais críticas para desenvolver uma identidade ativista e questionar relações de poder nacionais. Discutimos as implicações de uma visão ampliada de alfabetização para educadores. Esperamos que este estudo contribua para a pesquisa de alfabetização baseada em equidade que defenda o reconhecimento e a inclusão de letramentos vernaculares de estudantes rurais na escola.

Resumen

La visión del déficit ha sido un enfoque común para la investigación de las alfabetizaciones de los estudiantes rurales que, lamentablemente, continúa impregnando la política educativa y lingüística en todo el mundo. Organizaciones intergubernamentales como la *Organización para la Cooperación y Desarrollo Económico* han retratado a los estudiantes rurales en los países del Sur Global como estudiantes con déficits de alfabetización si sus prácticas generalmente carecen de las habilidades para participar en las prácticas tradicionales de alfabetización valoradas en la escuela. Estas representaciones deficitarias se utilizan contra los estudiantes rurales cuyas alfabetizaciones siguen estando excluidas de la política educativa y los planes de estudios. Este estudio de caso cualitativo aborda específicamente tales representaciones deficitarias problemáticas. Siguiendo un marco sociocultural de multialfabetizaciones, analizamos dos entrevistas semiestruturadas y artefactos para identificar las alfabetizaciones con las que se involucra a diario un joven rural. Los resultados indican que este joven rural se involucra en diversas alfabetizaciones que incluyen 1. Participar en formas de comunicación familiares, orales y encarnadas, 2. Analizar y componer textos multimodales para profundizar la comprensión en todos los contextos y 3. Aprovechar habilidades digitales críticas para desarrollar una identidad activista y cuestionar relaciones de poder en el ámbito nacional. Discutimos las implicaciones de una visión ampliada de la alfabetización para los educadores. Esperamos que este estudio contribuya a la investigación de la alfabetización basada en la equidad que aboga por el reconocimiento y la inclusión de las alfabetizaciones vernáculas de los estudiantes rurales en la escuela.

Palavras-chave

alfabetización; multialfabetización; educación rural; educación en alfabetización

Introduction: Living Literacies

What is literacy? Many will offer up a few main concepts in response to this seemingly simple question: reading, writing, and interpreting texts. While seemingly facile in nature, defining literacy as a set of learned cognitive skills and abilities to be acquired and performed has become universalized within societies globally. Yet, over the past forty years, understandings have expanded from the cognitive to the sociocultural to capture how literacy is a meaning-making tool that all employ to participate across distinct domains, cultures, and contexts (Corbitt et al., 2022; Kalantzis & Cope, 2020a; Vygotsky, 1978). Manifested as a set of diverse practices – such as specific ways of thinking, speaking, writing, dressing, and behaving across varied settings – literacy is continuously influenced by powerful yet abstract elements like ideologies, identities, and discourses (Gee, 2015; Pahl & Rowsell, 2012; Street, 1984; Veal, 2020): knowing to include emojis and abbreviated words while sending a text to a friend, understanding the inappropriate nature of a joke through observed glances, and maintaining a respectful tone when speaking to a higher-up at work all require a set of context-specific, literacy-related understandings.

As these examples illustrate, exploring literacy through a sociocultural lens shifts focus away from the individual toward the interactions and learning that occur across the spaces they navigate. Rather than a set of abilities forged in a formal educational setting—such as writing a structured essay or email, interpreting a canonical text or online advertisement, or sharing ideas with teachers and peers during a class debate— literacy encompasses the daily practices people engage in across their varied life domains, such as home, school, or work (Kalantzis & Cope, 2020; Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). These sociocultural influences on language begin at birth, when all individuals inherit a “primary Discourse” from their native home and environment. This primary Discourse takes shape through socially mediated patterns of “using language, other symbolic expressions, and ‘artifacts,’ of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member” among a group of people (Gee, 1996, p. 13). However, individuals also gain “secondary Discourses” and subsequent membership in varied “Discourse communities” over their lifetimes that continuously impact literacies and senses of self (Gee, 2015).

According to linguistic and literacy scholar James Paul Gee, one’s ability to access, understand, and produce literate texts within and across such Discourse communities influences the composition of “identity kits”. These kits are composed of specific ways of “behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and, often, reading and writing” (2015, p. 4). Carried across contexts, one’s identity kit will help them gain and maintain access within specific social spaces:

Being a member of a family, a peer group, a community group or church, a drinking group, a classroom, a profession, a research team, an ethnic group, a sub-culture, or a culture requires ‘rites of passage’ to enter the group, the maintenance of certain behaviors (ways of talking, valuing, thinking) to continue to be accepted as an ‘insider’, and continued ‘tests’ of membership applied by others. (Gee, 1990, p. 143; Kalantzis & Cope, 2020a).

With increasingly complex advancements in modern technologies, access to such social spaces —regardless of their global location— has been facilitated, allowing individuals to connect and interact with others, objects, and tools at great distances (Gee, 2004). While certainly not exclusive to the virtual realm, the literacy practices developed through digital texts and technologies —no longer limited by geographical boundaries— aptly capture how various, now global, socially and culturally shaped modes of representation such as speech, gesture, attire, image, written language, music, and movement work in conjunction to influence literate understandings (Corbitt et al., 2022; Mills & Unsworth, 2017; Steinkuehler, 2010). Mora et al. (2019) capture this in their research on second language literacies through gaming practices and communities. In their play of first-person shooter (e.g., *Call of Duty*) and massive multiplayer online role-playing genres (e.g., *World of Warcraft*), many Colombian gamers choose to access English-speaking global servers. In addition to navigating and interpreting the game’s word, image, sound, and tactile experiences, these gamers engage in often daily verbal and text-based communications with in-game teammates that provide robust, socioculturally literate experiences that surpass physical global boundaries.

Taking this expanded ‘multimodal’ experience of textual navigation into account requires broadening understandings of literacy to include both the mind *and* body —an invaluable shift brought to the fore in the 1990s by the New London Group. As a team of academics keen to transcend universalized literacy models by honouring variability in text and meaning-making, the New London Group’s conceptualization of multiliteracies marked a monumental evolution from an alphabetic-script notion of literacy, toward an embodied, multimodal, identity-based understanding of literacy (Kalantzis & Cope, 2020a; Mills & Unsworth, 2017; Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). Such developments have since transformed literacy studies around the world, including in Global South countries like Colombia (Álvarez-Valencia, 2016; Cañas et al., 2019; Losada-Rivas & Suaza-Cardoso, 2018; Mora, 2015; Rojas-Álvarez, 2011).

While the New London Group’s work has indeed contributed to monumental and inclusive shifts, their broadened conceptualizations are still often neglected in educational policy and formal learning environments: “Ironically, at a time when researchers are reconceptualizing and expanding what counts as learning to include multimodal ways of knowing,

governmental policies rely on constricted definitions of literacy and achievement” (Wohlwend, 2008, p. 135). Australian academics Kalantzis and Cope attribute such omissions to the normalization of didactic forms of literacy —centering formal language rules, mechanical skills, and drill/memory-based learning— that have the goal of “helping learners ‘fit’ into a dominant culture” (2020).

Rather than providing space for diverse cultures, languages, perspectives, texts, and interpretations, many educators are encouraged to teach towards passivity due to an underlying politics aimed at social reproduction and repetition over creativity and critical reflection (Vasquez et al., 2019). Colombian scholars have drawn attention to these problematic discrepancies between theory and practice, particularly for students in indigenous and marginalized rural communities (e.g., Correa et al., 2014; Mora et al., 2015, 2021; Roldán & Pelaez-Henao, 2017; Valencia Jiménez et al., 2016). The all-encompassing, full-embodied views on literate practice and focus on students’ unique identities, vernaculars, and local literacies are often disregarded in educational policy and practice, with inadequate and discriminatory language policies and guidelines for teaching and evaluation instead popularized.

Such ongoing, global criticisms and calls to action from educators and academics alike have framed this paper’s case study of 14-year-old Chaparro’s (pseudonym) life with literacy. Aware of the need to continue expanding views on what literate skill entails, particularly within the realm of education, this study asks: What are the literacies that a rural youth in northern Colombia experiences in his daily life? To respond to this inquiry, this case study explores Chaparro’s practices through a sociocultural, multiliteracies lens to draw attention to the complex “out-of-school” literacies and Discourses he hones beyond formal educational spaces (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012; 2020). While this particular study follows the practices and identities of one rural learner, it should be noted that youth spanning global contexts explore rich and robust literacies in similar ways across their daily lives (Burnett & Bailey, 2014; Gilje & Silseth, 2019). Rather than delineating these practices as ‘futile’, ‘non-academic’, even ‘wasted time’, we encourage fellow researchers, educators, and parents to explore them with youth in order to reframe archaic conceptions of what literacies and literacy learning can do and be.

Methodology

Participant Background: Chaparro’s Case

This paper’s case study draws on the recounted literacy practices of one Colombian youth, who was fourteen at the time of the study. Chaparro (pseudonym) lives in a small rural village along the Colombian Caribbean

coast that is inhabited by approximately 4,000 people. Chaparro lives with his immediate and extended family—his parents, two younger sisters, uncle, grandmother, and great grandparents—in a household composition common to the area. As an eighth grader, Chaparro attends the local public school located a short walk from his home. His school serves around 500 primary and secondary students from the community, and follows the official standardized curricula mandated by the National Ministry of Education.

In the teaching and assessment of required core subjects, including Languages (Spanish and English), Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies, a stringent focus is maintained on traditional literacy skills such as reading, writing, and rote memorization, particularly for success on high-stakes tests. These forms of evaluation require a specific type of written reflection centered upon school-based, alphabetic-script literacies, while also demanding that students demonstrate their knowledge and competencies by employing inference skills to make sense of the affirmative and supporting statements (“afirmaciones y evidencias”) found in the tests’ written texts (ICFES, 2022).

Data collection methods and analysis

In order to center the diverse literacy practices Chaparro hones beyond the restrictive confines of these school-based requirements, a case study method was selected to “examine, in-depth, a case within its real-life context” (Gilje & Silseth, 2019, p. 184). Upon receiving consent from Chaparro and his parents, data were collected through two semi-structured interviews—each around 45 minutes in length—that were accompanied by a home observation and review of work produced by the youth. To ensure Chaparro felt free to respond in an authentic manner during the interview process and subsequent discussions, open-ended questions were used, such as: ‘How do you like to communicate with friends and family?’, and ‘What do you think it means to be literate?’ The audio-recorded interviews were conducted by co-author 1 in Chaparro’s mother tongue of Spanish. Selected interview segments were transcribed through iterative listening and coded into categories according to described literate perceptions, events, and practices. These categories framed the three overarching sections included in this article’s analysis: Chaparro’s 1) family-based literacy practices, 2) multimodal literacy practices, and 3) critical digital literacy practices. With an intended audience of elementary and secondary educators, careful attention was made throughout the analysis section of this article to draw links between out-of-school literacy practices and formal educational contexts. For the purposes of this publication, all transcripts included were translated from Spanish to English by co-author 1.

Analysis: Exploring Chaparro's Literacies

With the aim of debunking common assumptions that the only valued literate practices are those honoured in formal educational contexts—such as reading, writing, and speaking 'proper' dialects of a given language—this paper explores the complex, rich, and diverse literacies Chaparro hones in his 'out-of-school' environments. Beginning with a description of the family-based literacies that are closely entwined with Chaparro's cultural background and traditions, our analysis will then shift toward the multimodal semiotic resources, like sound, image, text and gesture, he utilizes to make meaning from complex texts, and, lastly, close with an exploration of the critical digital literacies he draws from while navigating new media such as video games.

Family-Based Literacies

While maintaining focus on the New London Group's concept of multi-literacies (1996; Kalantzis & Cope, 2020a; Mills & Unsworth, 2017), our analysis of Chaparro's home literacies will first center on the culture and traditions that largely influence his identity and primary Discourse (Gee, 2015). Born and raised in a rural Colombian community surrounded by close kin, Chaparro's family-based literacies are mainly situated around a physical structure that has served as a marker of Colombian heritage for centuries: the palm kiosk (Figure 1).



Figure 1.

Picture of palm Kiosk in Chaparro's home-community.

Source: Tatiana Becerra

A remnant of indigenous tradition along the Colombian Caribbean coast (Fals-Borda, 2002), the palm kiosk is the preferred place for gathering and social interaction among family members at Chaparro’s home. On any given evening, a variety of *literacy events* —or moments of collaboratively composing a text (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012)— occur in this outdoor space. As Chaparro mentions in the interview segment below (Transcript 1), such literacy events include the recounting of anecdotes that often serve as a source of laughter and family connection:

Transcript 1.

Telling Stories at Home

00	T	What kind of things do you guys do at home?
01	Ch	We talk, stories.
02	T	You tell stories?
03	Ch	We tell stories.
04	T	What are the stories about?
05	Ch	Things from the past that make us laugh.
06	T	Who tells the stories?
07	Ch	Me.
08	T	Uhuh.
09	Ch	My uncle.
10	T	Your uncle, which?
11	Ch	Raíta.
12	T	Ah.
13	Ch	Everyone at home, everyone.
14	T	Your grandma?
15	Ch	Grandma yes, too. There are some stories she knows.
16	T	About what, what are the stories about?
17	Ch	Things that happened to us when you tripped, remember the day you tripped, that makes us laugh.

The oral storytelling Chaparro describes in this segment is an important component of his family-based literacy practices. As indicated in line 13, “everyone” in his family partakes —including the family elders such as his granduncle and grandmother— and uses oral storytelling as a literate tool to demonstrate allegiance to family time, histories, the home, and community Discourse (Gee, 2015). Oral traditions are important communicative practices that have been pivotal to recording histories and nurturing rural communities’ identities, thus sustaining and permeating social and cultural interaction in the Colombian Caribbean and Pacific Coasts (Escobar, 2018; Fals-Borda, 2002).

In addition to honouring such long-standing oral traditions, the literacy events occurring in the palm kiosk demonstrate a rich grasp of literacies beyond spoken word alone. Recent developments in literacy studies have turned to affect-based frameworks in order to decenter the text and instead place emphasis on feeling, connection, embodiment, and sensation. Heavily influenced by Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza's theory of affect, built upon by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1988), affect-based perspectives make room for considerations of how, through literacy events, bodies (human and non-human, physical and non-physical, singular and collective) perform a continuous, unpredictable, ever-evolving dance that elicits intensities, energies, and disruptions.

Regarding literacy as being permeable in this way opens new worlds of possibility created through “emergent, material, and social relations” (Ehret et al., 2016, p. 3). In the case of the oral storytelling that occurs in Chaparro's family palm kiosk, the human body works as a ‘text assemblage’, whereby gestural and spatial modalities converse to expand possibilities for communicating and making meaning (Leander & Boldt, 2013). The use of context specific spoken language, gesture, gaze, prosody, and physical space converge, providing Chaparro and his family members with powerful affordances in producing literacy events that are understood and felt collectively.

This embodied sense of literacy is nicely reflected through the family-based literacies occurring in the palm kiosk. At a later time in the interview transcribed above, Chaparro described how his family enjoys playing board games like *parcheesi* on a regular basis. While the game demands that players read and understand various physical objects —such as the board, card signs and numbers, dice, and chips— the strategic play of those aiming to win also requires the observation and understanding of players' gestures and gazes to anticipate the next moves. Just as in the palm kiosk, the family-based literacies Chaparro draws upon during his *parcheesi* gameplay require a complex process of meaning-making across the mind, body, material and non-material, while also centuring the traditions and connections that his family values.

Despite acknowledging his participation in and enjoyment of these family-based practices, Chaparro placed little value on the literacies forged in his home life. He, in fact, described the deficit view of his and his family's literate abilities during the interview. Chaparro explained that he lacked confidence in his performance of the literacy practices valued in school, and, therefore, believed himself to be non-literate and “bad at Spanish”, his mother tongue. He spoke of ongoing struggles in Spanish class that stemmed from difficulties learning to read when he was younger, and continued to manifest as an uneasiness he experienced when asked to read at school. While Chaparro described the importance he

attributed to the traditional literacy skills honoured in school and society more broadly – stating “to me, reading is learning” and “literacy is something you need to be a person” —he also spoke of his lack of motivation, struggles to concentrate in class, and issues with producing the print-based texts required at school.

The long-standing deficit conceptions Chaparro has developed about his literate ability have put him at a learning standstill in formal educational environments, resulting in poor performance in his language classes. Further, Chaparro expressed similar deficit views of his parents and relatives, whom he considers unable to help him with school tasks as they “know nothing” —an opinion contrasted by the rich description of family-based literacies painted during the interview. Chaparro’s views draw attention to a postmodern concern around ‘acceptable’ and ‘non-acceptable’ forms of a given language (Kalantzis & Cope, 2020): When multiple dialects, registers, and versions of a given language exist, why are students required to master the voice of the nation-state in order to be considered as literate? As researchers and educators, these deficit self/family perceptions are a clear indication of the problematic, narrow conceptualization of literacies and language practices popularized within the school system, particularly as they come from a youth whose life is rich with a myriad of multimodal, digital, and critical literacy practices, as we will continue to describe below.

Multimodal Literacies

While robust and meaningful in nature, Chaparro’s out-of-school literacies go far beyond his family-based practices. Each evening while watching the news on TV, Chaparro draws upon his ability to navigate and critically analyze multimodal texts. Experiencing the interplay of diverse modes —semiotic resources including text, image, sound, gesture, and music (Jewitt, 2008; Mills & Unsworth, 2017)— while consuming the news has motivated Chaparro to search for other texts with multiple modalities in order to gain new perspectives and information, as he describes in the interview segment included below:

Transcript 2.

Finding the Affordances of Other Modes

00	T	Have you seen other news that have impacted you?
01	Ch	Yes, the one about the car that, where a lot of people got burned and that man was not conscious because he dared to take out the battery of the car that exploded.
02	T	Hmmm yes it was terrible news.
03	Ch	And the videos showed, when I searched, because I bought cellphone data and searched, there were people in flames.

The scene discussed in this interview segment is of the explosion of a truck transporting gasoline in a small town in Santa Marta, Colombia. After initially learning about the tragic event and its proximity to his own home, Chaparro was motivated to search for additional information in the form of YouTube videos. The videos he found were recorded by witnesses during the explosion, featuring uncensored visuals, live sounds, and a first-person perspective that Chaparro could not obtain by solely watching the news. His desire to access a vivid, realistic representation of the tragic event demonstrates an awareness of varied multimodal affordances, as well as an understanding of content restrictions across media platforms.

Chaparro’s experiences watching the news and doing supplementary research have also influenced some of the texts produced for his school assignments. During the interview, he described a project assigned in his Technology class that required students to reflect on machines and their impact on the environment. Chaparro chose to reinterpret a segment he had seen while watching the news by creating a cartoon and including written comments on his representation of a petrol machine, as he describes in the interview segment below:

Transcript 3.

Shifting Meaning from the TV News to a Cartoon.

00	Ch	They asked about what one knew about dealing with the environment, how to control it, the chemicals, the oil, the machines, the harm they’re doing to the environment, and so I drew a petrol machine.
01	T	And how was your cartoon?
02	Ch	It was a petrol machine, and the oil spilled and touched the fish under the ocean. I got the idea from the news on the TV that the oil had spilled in the river and the fish were dead.

The multimodal composition Chaparro completed for his school assignment demonstrates his ability to transfer meaning across varied contexts and modes in order to express a specific message to a specific audience. This process of creation requires a “critical eye towards different genres of texts and a meta-awareness of these texts” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012, p. 47). Rather than simply describing what he had watched in the news segment—a petrol machine contaminating the aquatic home of depicted floating dead fish—Chaparro chose to create what he believed to be a more powerful representation by visibly showing how the oil leaking from the petrol machine was affecting the fish, and describing the process in his own words.

This is an example of a textual ‘remix’ and ‘transmediation’, as Chaparro drew from the meaning of a source text (the news segment), while altering (or ‘remixing’) its modes and shifting (or ‘transmediating’) semiotic content from one mode to another (Mills & Unsworth, 2017). By removing the sound, speech, and print, and including his own created visual of

the ideas he was aiming to represent, Chaparro was able to bring new meaning to the news segment. Although the different ‘semiotic modes’ of sound, images, written text, and drawings might appear to contain the same content—a petrol spill contaminating water—they are nevertheless “conveyors of qualitatively different kinds of messages” that “impart certain kinds of meanings more easily and naturally than others” (Hull & Nelson, 2005, p. 229). Chaparro’s multimodal remixing required both critical and creative engagement with various source texts, and a “semiotic awareness” of the affordances of resources working together to produce new meanings (van Leeuwen, 2017; Lim, 2021a).

In selecting the information and method of representation he found most powerful and fitting for his audience—in this case, his teacher—Chaparro was also able to infuse his literate production with his own agency and identity (Thomas & Seely Brown, 2011; Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). Through his literate abilities, Chaparro transformed the TV segment into something new and meaningful: an original text fitting the characteristics he knew were valued in the classroom domain and commonplace Discourses of his Technology course. Although this example of multimodal textual remixing was completed for a school assignment, Chaparro did not consider it to be as rigorous a literate production as a formal written essay due to the value placed on didactic literacy practices. While this shortcoming of the education system was indeed felt by the researchers, Chaparro’s textual remix still provided him with a strong sense of pride and accomplishment, and he was excited to share what he had produced during the interview, as demonstrated by his bright smile (Figure 2).



Figure 2.

Stencil photo of Chaparro smiling while describing his textual remix.

Source: Tatiana Becerra

Critical Digital Literacies

Chaparro's ability to understand, analyze, and remix multimodal texts like YouTube videos and TV news segments exemplifies his honing of digital literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Mills, 2016; Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). As Chaparro found himself looking to the digital domain to expand his understanding of the world through multimodal texts that resonated with him, he developed his critical analytic skills and began forging his identity as a young activist. In addition to the explosion in Santa Marta, Chaparro described how he chose to look further into the case of police brutality that occurred in Bogotá in September 2020 which was widely covered in the news. While the national media portrayed the case as an accident rather than a murder committed by the police, Chaparro questioned its bias and chose to do his own investigating. He explained: "It didn't seem right to me because I watched the video recorded by the man's partner... a video I found on YouTube. The man asked [the police] to be left alone when he was being beaten, but they put that thing that electroshocks you."

In their article, "Critical Literacy as a Way of Being and Doing," Vasquez and colleagues (2019) conceptualize "dynamic digital doings" as a critical way of living and being that transcends contexts. When Chaparro decided to explore the murder through a different lens, he called attention to the idea that texts and literacy practices are never neutral, and naturalized understandings must be explored and analyzed through different lenses in order to suggest possibilities for change (Vasquez et al., 2019). Rather than blindly consuming what he watched on the news, Chaparro's critical digital literacies informed his understanding and later judgement of the man's death: "That's the police's fault." This powerful comment evinces Chaparro's ability to evaluate and compare sources—in this case, the YouTube video as well as the news segment he watched reported on national TV. By making his own judgement, Chaparro's critical literacies helped him to identify the use of extreme and unnecessary force by the police officers involved, which unveiled the corrupt power relations in the area.

While certainly meaningful in helping Chaparro develop his activist identity, his digital literacy practices are also influenced by one of his 'ruling passions' (Barton & Hamilton, 1998): video games. As an avid player of games downloaded to his cellphone—like *Counter Terrorist* and *Dream League*—Chaparro taps into his digital literacy skills to improve his gameplay, as described in the transcribed excerpt below:

Transcript 4.

Finding Weapons.

00	Ch	I search for videos of laughter and games to learn more about the game.
01	T	Where do you search, any special website?
02	Ch	Just in Google.
03	T	Ah you search in Google, and how do you search which words do you use?
04	Ch	I search "how to find new weapons in the game".
05	T	In Counter Terrorist?
06	Ch	((nods))

Using Google as a search platform, Chaparro is able to find instruction-based walkthrough videos that help him improve various components of his gameplay, such as how and where to locate new weapons in *Counter Terrorist* (Figure 3). According to Toh and Lim (2022), a player's ability to gain information on a game's design features —"including knowing how to work across different semiotic modes, such as language, visuals, audio, music, and action to perform critical and creative actions in the game" (p. 11)— demonstrates deep engagement with multimodal literacy practices.



Figure 3.

Screenshot of a play scene in Counter Terrorist

In addition to reading, analyzing, and transferring the content he navigates in these videos, Chaparro described how he reads the game itself as a text in order to learn the best strategies: "The game is telling you how to shoot, whom to kill, and how to move or walk." In this description, the video game *Counter Terrorist* is presented as a text featuring various modes —such as image, movement, and written words— working in harmony to help players understand game dynamics and Discourses (Figure 3). In this sense, reading the game and interpreting its meaning is a literacy event

that Chaparro engages in within the digital domain: a ‘figured world’ (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012) whose affordances allow him to author new selves and inhabit new spaces.

The development of these forms of complex literacies and identities through gameplay and game-related searches have been delineated across studies exploring a range of genres, formats, and game-based communities (e.g., Bailey et al., 2017; Gee, 2007, 2014; Scolari et al., 2022). Skult and Smed (2022), for instance, delineate the complex multimodal narrative designs in the commercial PC game *C.L.A.Y: The Last Redemption* that require players to critically navigate various modes (e.g., spatial, aural, visual) and interactive elements (e.g., branching narrative pathways, navigable designs). While these potentials have become increasingly acknowledged across research spanning the fields of literacy, education, and game-based studies (Garcia et al., 2020) —with recent surges even leading to collaborations between governments and gaming companies over the course of the pandemic (e.g., the #CRUSHCOVID initiative by the Canadian Government [Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020])— deficit conceptions still pervade contemporary discourse, resulting in a continued refusal to honour and integrate videogames and game-based literacies into formal learning contexts (Nash & Brady, 2021).

Conclusions: Chaparro’s Life with Literacy

Although our findings are by no means intended to be generalizable to all youth or rural populations, this case study (Gerber et al., 2016; Gilje & Silseth, 2019) provides an in-depth analysis of the diverse and meaningful literacies that rural youth —like Chaparro from northern Colombia— live in their daily lives. Chaparro’s literacies encompass a wide range of diverse practices, from participating in family-based literacies involving oral storytelling and embodied forms of communication, to analyzing and composing multimodal texts to deepen understandings across contexts, and tapping into critical digital skills to develop an activist identity and question national power relations. Yet Chaparro, like so many other youth navigating contemporary school systems globally, has developed a deficit conception of his literate abilities due to a stringent focus on narrowly defined notions of literacy limited to alphabetic-script reading and writing skills. Such frameworks have historically harmed non-elite peoples worldwide (Duboc & Ferraz, 2020; Villegas et al., 2021).

The traditions and practices of minoritized indigenous communities, for instance, have been cast away from schools, creating a literacy debt perpetuated by policymakers, administrators, researchers, and educators (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Souto-Manning et al, 2021). Thus, we hope this

piece contributes to a broadened understanding of rural youths' literacies, overcoming essentialistic and often deficit-based representations of rural literacies that have dominated the education and literacy fields (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). Language and literacy scholars (e.g., Mnyand & Mbelani, 2018) have long attempted to challenge such essentialism, shedding light on the unique nature of rural literacies as place-based, but also as practices that can be globally shared (Corbett & Donehower, 2017; Green & Corbett, 2013), as is the case of Chaparro's engagement with digital communities through his gameplay, especially during the COVID lockdown.

Seeing as Global North perspectives have historically dominated the description and analysis of rurality and rural literacies (e.g., Azano et al., 2021), this article contributes a unique perspective from the Global South to address a pressing need across the field of literacy studies. We also add to a not recent yet still prevalent body of research exploring sociocultural orientations to literacy learning (Morrel & Rowsell, 2020; Pahl & Rowsell, 2020) in hopes of capturing the ways in which youths' out-of-school literacies are socially and culturally mediated, steeped in critical understandings, drawn from the intermixing of diverse modes, and rigorous in nature: practices we believe should be harmoniously valued and integrated into educational policy and formal school contexts.

As experts in the field of literacy studies have concluded (e.g., Kalantzis & Cope, 2020a; New London Group, 1996; Wohllwend, 2008), the most meaningful curriculum is not created through a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, but instead molded around the identities, backgrounds, knowledge, interests, and community concerns of each student navigating the classroom space (Vasquez et al., 2019). Honouring varied dialects and vernaculars over a standard form of language, including digital and multimodal texts in addition to high canonical literature, and respecting the full-embodied, collaborative nature of meaning-making will equip youth with the confidence and tools required in our ever-evolving, complex landscape. Literacy has truly transformative potential, and it is up to us as educators, researchers, and administrators to create the conditions for young people to unleash it.

References

- Azano, A. P., Eppley, K., & Biddle, C. (Eds.). (n.d.) *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Rural Education in the United States*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Alvarez Valencia, J.A (2016). Meaning making and communication in the multimodal age: ideas for language teachers. *Colombian Applied Linguistics*, 18 (1), 98-115. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14483/calj.v18n1.8403>

- Bailey, C., Burnett, C., & Merchant, G. (2017). Assembling literacies in virtual play. In K. A. Mills, A. Stornaiuolo, A. Smith, & J. Z. Pandya (Eds.). *Handbook of writing, literacies, and education in digital cultures*. (pp. 187-197). Routledge.
- Barton, D., Hamilton, M., & Ivanic, R. (1999). *Situated literacies: theorising reading and writing in context*. Routledge.
- Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (1998). *Local literacies-reading and writing in one community*. Routledge.
- Burnett, C., & Bailey, C. (2014). Conceptualising collaboration in hybrid sites: playing Minecraft together and apart in a primary classroom. In C. Burnett, J. Davies, G. Merchant, & J. Rowsell (Eds.). *New Literacies Around the Globe: Policy and Pedagogy* (pp. 50-71). Routledge.
- Cañas, C., Ocampo, Á. P., Rodríguez, A. K., López-Ladino, M., & Mora, R. A. (2019). Toward a participatory view of early literacies in second language contexts: A reflection on research from Colombia. In I. Management Association (Ed.), *Early Childhood Development: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (pp. 378-402). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-7507-8.ch018>
- Corbett, M., & Donehower, K. (2017). Rural literacies: Toward social cartography. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 32(5), 1-13. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1152313.pdf>
- Corbitt, A., Wargo, J. M., & O'Connor, C. (2022). Encountering unnatural. E-literature: Tracing interpretation and relationality across multimodal response and digital annotation. *English in Education*, 56(2), 186-200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04250494.2021.1933424>
- Correa, D., Usma, J., & Montoya, J. C. (2014). El Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo: un estudio exploratorio en el Departamento de Antioquia, Colombia. *Íkala, revista de lenguaje y cultura*, 19(1), 101-116.
- Deleuze, G. (1988). *Spinoza, practical philosophy* (R. Hurley, Trans.). City Lights Books.
- Duboc, A. P., & Ferraz, D. de M. (2020). What's behind a literacy war? A discursive and political analysis of the neoconservative Brazilian literacy policy. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 15(4), 436-457. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2020.1800714>
- Ehret, C., Hollett, T., & Jocius, R. (2016). The matter of new media making: an intra-action analysis of adolescents making a digital book trailer. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 48(3), 346-377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296X16665323>
- Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the pluriverse: Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds*. Duke University Press.
- Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación (ICFES). (2022). Guía de orientación. Pruebas Saber 11, 2022-2. <https://www2.icfes.gov.co/documents/39286/2507397/Gui%CC%81a+de+orientacio%CC%81n+Saber+11.%C2%B0+2022-2.pdf>

- Fals-Borda, O. (2002). *Historia doble de la costa* (2. ed). Ancora Editores.
- Garcia, A., Dail, J. S., & Witte, S. (2020). Gaming literacies and the boundaries of play. In A. Garcia, J. S. Dail, & S. Witte (Eds.). *Studying gaming literacies: Theories to inform classroom practice* (pp. 1-7). Brill Sense.
- Gee, J. P. (1990). *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses, Critical Perspectives on Literacy and Education*. Routledge.
- Gee, J. P. (2004). *Situated language and learning: a critique of traditional schooling*. Routledge.
- Gee, J. P. (2007). *Good video games + good learning: Collected essays on video games, learning, and literacy*. Peter Lang.
- Gee, J. P. (2014). *Unified discourse analysis: Language, reality, virtual worlds, and video games*. Routledge.
- Gee, J. P. (2015). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses* (5th ed.). Routledge.
- Gerber, H. R., Abrams, S. S., Curwood, J. S., & Magnifico, A. (2017). *Conducting qualitative research of learning in online spaces*. Sage.
- Gilje, Ø., & Silseth, K. (2019). Unpacking FIFA play as text and action in literacy practices in and out of school. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 44(2), 180-192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2018.1563105>
- Green, W., & Corbett, M. (2013). *Rethinking rural literacies: Transnational perspectives*. Pallgrave McMillan.
- Holland, D., & Lave, J. (Eds.) (2001). *History in person: enduring struggles, contentious practice, intimate identities*. School of American Research Press.
- Hull, G. A., & Nelson, M. E. (2005). Locating the semiotic power of multimodality. *Written communication*, 22(2), 224-261. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088304274170>
- Jewitt, C. (2008). Multimodality and Literacy in School Classrooms. *Review of Research in Education*, 32(1), 241-267. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X07310586>
- Kalantzis, M., & Cope, B. (2020a). *Multiliteracies and learning by design: Meaning making and literacy learning in the era of digital text*. Retrieved from <https://newlearningonline.com/multiliteracies/overview-videos>
- Kalantzis, M., & Cope, B. (2020b). Chapter 7: Critical Literacy Pedagogy. <https://newlearningonline.com/literacies/chapter-7>
- Kress, G. (1997). *Before writing: Rethinking the paths to literacy*. Routledge.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in us schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3-12. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3876731>

- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Digital literacies: Concepts, policies and practices*. Peter Lang.
- Leander, K., & Boldt, G. (2013). Rereading "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies": Bodies, Texts, and Emergence. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 45(1), 22–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296X12468587>
- Lim, F. V. (2021a). *Designing learning with embodied teaching: perspectives from multimodality*. Routledge.
- Lim, F. V. (2021b). Towards education 4.0: an agenda for teaching multiliteracies in the English language classroom. In F. A. Hamied (Ed.), *Literacies, culture, and society towards Industrial Revolution 4.0: Reviewing policies, expanding research, enriching practices in Asia*. (pp. 11–30). Nova Science.
- Losada Rivas, J.J., & Suaza Cardozo, D.A. (2018). Video-Mediated Listening and Multiliteracies. *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal*, 20(1), 11-24. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14483/22487085.12349>
- Mills, K., & Unsworth, L. (2017). *Multimodal literacy*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education.
- Mills, K. A. (2016). *Literacy theories for the digital age: Social, critical, multimodal, spatial, material and sensory lenses*. Multilingual Matters.
- Mnyanda, L., & Mbelani, M. (2018). Are we teaching critical digital literacy? Grade 9 learners' practices of digital communication. *Reading & Writing*, 9(1), 179–188. <https://doi.org/10.4102/rw.v9i1.188>
- Mora, R. A., & Cañas, C (2020). Literacy studies in Colombia: Toward repositioning our field in the circulation of knowledge production. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 54 (4), 439-441. <https://library.ncte.org/journals/RTE/issues/v54-4/30741>
- Mora, R. A., Campano, G., Thomas, E. E., Stornaiuolo, A., Monea, B., Thakurta, A., & Coleman, J. J. (2020). Decentering and Decentralizing Literacy Studies: An Urgent Call for Our Field. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 54 (4), 313-317. <https://library.ncte.org/journals/RTE/issues/v54-4/30735>
- Mora, R. A., Castaño, S., Orrego, T. S., Hernandez, M., & Ramírez, D. (2019).
- Mora, R. A., Castaño, M., Gómez, N., Ramírez, N., Mejía-Vélez, M. C., & Pulgarín, C. (2015). Second Language Literacies in the City: New Practices in Urban Spaces of Medellín, Colombia. Paper presented at the AERA 2015 Conference. https://www.academia.edu/11993521/Second_Language_Literacies_in_the_City_New_Practices_in_Urban_Spaces_of_Medell%C3%ADn_Colombia
- Morrell, E., & Rowsell, J. (2019). *Stories from inequity to justice in literacy education*. Routledge.

- Nash, B. L., & Brady, R. B. (2022). Video games in the secondary English language arts classroom: a state-of-the-art review of the literature. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 57(3), 957–981. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.454>
- New London Group, The. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60-93. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.66.1.17370n67v22j160u>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]. (2018). Bridging the rural digital divide. *OECD Digital Economy Papers*, 265, OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/852bd3b9-en>
- Pahl, K., & Rowsell, J. (2012). *Literacy and Education*. SAGE.
- Pahl, K., & Rowsell, J. (2020). *Living literacies: Literacy for social change*. MIT press.
- Public Health Agency of Canada (2020). Government of Canada and Canada's video game industry team up to #CRUSHCOVID. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/news/2020/10/government-of-canada-and-canadas-video-game-industry-team-up-to-crushcovid.html>
- Rojas Álvarez, G. (2011). Writing using blogs: A way to engage Colombian adolescents in meaningful communication. *Profile Issues in Teachers Professional Development*, 13(2), 11-27. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1051501.pdf>
- Roldan, Á. M., & Peláez Henao, O. A. (2017). Pertinencia de las políticas de enseñanza del inglés en una zona rural de Colombia: Un estudio de caso en Antioquia. *Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura*, 22(2), 121–139. <https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.ikala.v22n01a08>
- Rowsell, J., & Pahl, K. (2007). Sedimented identities in texts: instances of practice. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 42(3), 388–401. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.42.3.3>
- Scolari, C. A., Pires, F., & Masanet, M. J. (2022). Gamers never play alone: an interface-centred analysis of online video gaming. *First Monday*, 27(1) <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v27i1.11623>
- Skult, N., & Smed, J. (2022). The marriage of quantum computing and interactive storytelling. In B. Bostan (Eds.) *Games and Narrative: Theory and Practice* (pp. 191-206). International Series on Computer Entertainment and Media Technology. Springer, Cham. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81538-7>
- Souto-Manning, M., Gail, B., & Rollins, E. (2021). The Language and Literacy Debt: Racialized De-Valuations of Literacy Practices and Communicative Repertoires. In H.R. Milner IV & K. Lomotey (Eds). *Handbook of Urban Education* (2nd edition) (pp. 253-266). Routledge.

- Steinkuehler, C.A. (2010). Video games and digital literacies. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 54(1), 61–63. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20749077>
- Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas, D., & Seely Brown, J. (2011). *A new culture of learning: cultivating the imagination for a world of constant change*. Stanford University Press.
- Toh, W., & Lim, F. V. (2022). Learning in digital play: a dual case study of video gamers' independent play. *Research and Practice in Technology Enhanced Learning*, 17(6), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41039-022-00182-2>
- Valencia Jiménez, N. N., Carrillo Gullo, M. A., Ortega Montes, J. E. (2016). Percepción del proceso de alfabetización de jóvenes y adultos indígenas del departamento de Guainía (Colombia): La mirada de sus protagonistas. *Investigación y desarrollo*, 24(1), 118-141. <https://doi.org/10.14482/indes.24.1.8687>
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2017). Multimodal literacy. *Viden Om Læsning* (knowledge about Reading), 21, 4–11. https://www.videnomlaesning.dk/media/2127/21_theo-van-leeuwen.pdf
- Vasquez, V. M., Janks, H., & Comber, B. (2019). Critical literacy as a way of being and doing. *Language Arts*, 96(5), 300-311. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2221126990>
- Vea, T. (2020). The learning of emotion in/as sociocultural practice: The case of animal rights activism. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 29(3), 311-346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2020.1748036>
- Villegas, K., Yin, P., & Gutiérrez, K. D. (2021). Interrogating Linguaging Through Power, Race, and Space in the Schooling of Translingual Student Populations. In H.R. Milner IV & K. Lomotey (Eds). *Handbook of Urban Education* (2nd edition) (pp. 296-310). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429331435>
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2008). Play as a literacy of possibilities: Expanding meanings in practices, materials, and spaces. *Language Arts*, 86(2), 127-136. <https://hdl.handle.net/2022/3253>