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POSSIBLE READING FROM SCHOOL LIBRARIES

Recovering Historical Data and Mexican Initiatives.

Alma Carrasco Altamirano

The challenges of addressing the formation of readers from within the school are numerous, and the public policies to tackle them in Mexico have lacked continuity. The existence of books to nourish children's everyday reading is essential, and in a country where cultural opportunities are so unequally distributed, the school is a fundamental space for reading.

In this text, I aim to share general historical information to situate reading initiatives that have been promoted in Mexican schools since 1986, with *Los libros del Rincón* and the 2001 *National Reading Program*, to document state efforts to ensure the presence of "authentic" books, with original authors' texts, in addition to the texts contained in school manuals, which, as Free Textbooks, have been offered since 1959.

Because it is possible to promote reading and because the school is a privileged space to do so, I aim in this article to share information that has allowed me to situate and understand the challenge of enabling reading.

Situating in time the major changes that have made it possible—since the advent of the printing press—to access an infinite variety of works to read is as necessary as recognizing the challenges schools face in offering original books, different from didactic manuals. Since 1986, Mexico has promoted school-based initiatives to create libraries that, in such an unequal country, provide reading opportunities to children. It is important to know these initiatives and to find ways to frame our teaching interventions within this context, to offer students a reading every day.

Building on the contributions of Mirta Castedo (2010), I present here an overview of various contributions that resonate with our ways of teaching and supporting reading in schools, inviting readers to situate their own experiences as learners and to reflect on their interventions as teachers.

As a psychologist, I began my inquiries into reading by restricting the activity to the individual dimension. As a teacher, librarian, and reading promoter, I now know that while reading is singular, the social conditions for its realization are fostered in each person's belonging groups. Family members, the neighborhood library, and the school provide resources, imagine and test activities, and build possibilities for daily reading practices. This text seeks to encourage the activity of these social actors in building communities of reading practice.



Revolutions and Challenges of Access to Reading Over Time

According to Cavallo and Chartier (2017), we can recognize three great revolutions in reading throughout history. The first refers to the transition from oral to silent reading, which occurred before the invention of the printing press. The advent of the printing press multiplied the production of copies of a work and fueled a second revolution: the shift from intensive reading—of a single work, such as the Bible—to extensive reading of various available works. The third revolution is marked by the ability to read digital books, not just printed ones, beginning in the 1990s. As an expression of these radical changes, social initiatives have also emerged, such as turning reading into a daily activity; school initiatives, like including certain works as mandatory reading; and actions promoted by governmental, social, or educational institutions, such as the creation of libraries or the availability of works online.

Faced with the massive circulation of books, since 1710 the publishing industry has been concerned with regulating the free copying and circulation of commercially produced works. In this context, copyright limits the rights of readers, and access to books—both printed and digital—is dictated by profitability. Multiplying the existence and use of school libraries is an alternative for book access.

School-based reading remains more intensive than extensive, mostly through school manuals. Let us recall the reading books in various generations of Mexico's Free Textbooks (LTG). I want to highlight two features of the texts contained in these books:

- Literary works prevail over informational ones.
- They tend to construct didactic expository texts "for the book," rather than offering original authored texts.

The literature offered in the manuals is a summarized, adapted version of classics or drawn from oral traditions. The texts produced by textbook authors are not always of high quality and often fail to engage the reader. An exception is the anthology included in the 1996 first-grade book, remembered fondly by those who read it as "the little dog book" (accessible here:

<https://historico.conaliteg.gob.mx/H1993P1ES139.htm>).

School Libraries and Reading Foundations in the Curriculum

Various studies on reading as a social activity show that schooling is a strong predictor of reading practices (Griswold et al., 2005). Consistent with this, since its creation the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) has promoted the existence of libraries and



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authentic books to increase opportunities for encountering works and authors as conditions for reading. Reading Corners, the name given to the program, offer alternatives to the traditional education system (Acevedo, 1992, p.4), as they “provide a considerable number of students from working-class backgrounds the opportunity to engage with different expressions of written culture.” The 2001 National Reading Program (PNL) maintained the name Reading Corners and promoted, as part of a guiding strategy “toward a country of readers,” a program of selecting, printing, and supplying book collections. Its objective was “to improve students’ basic communication skills and to install the material conditions for the development of the pedagogical model” (SEP, 2007, p. 9). The PNL was created and led by Elisa Bonilla Rius as Director General of Educational Materials at SEP (Carrasco Altamirano, 2006).

On the value of school libraries, Bonilla Rius coordinated a collective work that includes research, data, reflections, and practices from various contemporary voices on this challenge (Bonilla et al., 2009).

Understanding reading through the teaching materials that schools produce for students also allows us to interpret the positions and definitions of written language and to recognize those that have impacted Latin America and Mexico, as masterfully discussed in a text by Mirta Castedo (2010). Table 1 presents a brief selection of their contributions.

The works of Ana Teberosky and Telma Weiss can clearly guide this reflection, which places at the center the recognition of learners’ contributions to the construction of their knowledge and the need to multiply resources and opportunities to ensure educational equity in Mexico. Knowing and reflecting on these and other contributions will allow us to situate our pedagogical interventions in and from the school.

Clearly, the works of Ferreiro and Teberosky informed the working principles of the fourth generation of LTG in Mexico in the 1990s. The contributions of Emilia Ferreiro’s studies on the psychogenesis of written language are fundamental to recognizing the challenges children face in appropriating the conventional writing system through the active construction of interpretations different from the conventional ones. This reflection can be enriched by visualizing and trying to understand the various ways writing systems are organized. Those learning to write in Spanish also learn to identify the alphabetic system that governs our language, nurtured by exposure to, exploration of, reading and rereading of various literary and expository works for young children, which school libraries potentially offer.

Other Libraries, Other Books, Other Possibilities in Mexico for Other Readers

In addition to the materials available in basic education classrooms through SEP’s sustained supply policies between 1986 and 2020, it is



Table 1

Author	Country	Perspective and Orientation	Statements Guiding Interventions
Kenneth Goodman	United States	Whole Language Perspective.	Reading as the construction of meaning from text.
Ana María Borzone	Argentina	Phonological Awareness Perspective.	Texts are the focus of teaching.
Emilia Ferreiro	México	Constructivist Epistemological Perspective.	Impact on the construction of the subject and object, developing a movement to bring teaching closer to learning.
Ana Teberosky	Argentina	Didactic Orientation, Concern for Teacher Training from a Constructivist Perspective.	Overcoming the division between knowing and not knowing, which degrades the knowledge of beginners.
Telma Weiss	Brazil	Schools as centers of pedagogical experimentation and teacher training.	To denaturalize failure, education must be understood as a political act.
Rubén Cucuzza	Argentina	Voices of Historians.	Socio-historical practices of reading and writing in different contexts.
Anne Marie Chartier	France	Historical Approach to Teaching Practices.	Cultural historicity of “knowing how to read”.



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important to consider other spaces also served by SEP or by the cultural sector in the country.

A social reading promotion initiative designed for the general public is Reading Rooms, launched in 1995:

The program operates through a simple yet demanding scheme: citizens provide the venue, gather their readers, organize sessions, and manage resources for their rooms' activities. They contribute their knowledge, vitality, and vocation without any compensation. Conaculta, for its part, provides an initial fund of 100 books, which grows according to the continuity and growth of each room (Vizcarra et al., 2012, p. 157).

Focused on early childhood, the program Early Education: A Good Start, aimed at children aged 0 to 3, asserts that reading is a priority: telling stories and reading poems, singing rhymes, playing guessing games, challenging with tongue twisters, reading the same book several times if the children ask; reading every day, several times a day; playing with words, conversing, listening, singing. For this, each Child Care Center (CAI) has its own library, which is also the families' library. To date, SEP has incorporated 214 libraries into CAIs through the allocations of 2018, 2019, and 2020 (López, 2020).

For the youngest readers, it is essential to have picture books and picture albums. It is very common for young readers, when

reading picture albums, to ask us to repeat the reading of a specific page or of the entire book, thus demonstrating an attentive, engaged, and demanding reception. As Colomer (2002) explains, in a picture album the images can complement or contradict the information, sometimes exaggerating it in different ways to create ironic or humorous effects. Illustrations sometimes contain foreshadowing and other times require inferences, which demands an active reception from the reader that contributes to constructing the meaning of the story.

Other readers discover their passion for reading through informational books. Below I briefly present some key characteristics of non-literary or informational texts, following the contributions of Garralón (2013). The reader may dislike linear reading. Unlike a literary book, an informational book offers different possibilities for reading order: "Reading an informational book cannot generally be approached as reading from beginning to end and from left to right" (p.173). A reader may look for clues that speak to them: "The graphic design of these books has developed so much that it allows for many different readings" (p.39). They allow for a reading that is not always linear, sometimes continuous and sometimes random (cf. p.31). Since the reader may not be familiar with scientific topics, these books rely on the reader's interest but also fill them with questions (cf. p.26). "Appealing to the reader makes them a participant in their reading process and invites them to read as if someone were speaking directly to them"



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(p.51). The reader may feel they do not need others to read: “They are equipped for independent learning” (p.30).

More than a characterization of books by genre, what I want to emphasize in this section is the importance of recognizing the variety of books in the ways readers use them. The importance of having a variety of works will support bringing readers closer who also have varied interests.

Bringing readers quality books funded by the State helps create spaces for encounters with reading in diverse settings. It is desirable to multiply these allocations, but it is also necessary to evaluate their impact on the everyday uses that mediators and readers make of them.

Authors, Works, Collections, and Libraries That Have Nourished and Can Nourish Reading

Over time, works have been produced that have nourished, through their very existence, both adult and children’s reading practices. The Bible, printed by Gutenberg in 1456, enabled the multiplication of religiously oriented reading. The printing press, which made mass production of works possible, also made possible the 1658 publication of *Orbis Sensualium* by the humanist J.A. Comenius, a bilingual work originally published in Latin-German and later in other languages. Comenius proposed using, for didactic

purposes, images associated with words and graphically represented titles. The words are associated with semantic fields, facilitating their recognition, comprehension, and memorization. “Essentially, the procedure consists of using the images of each panel and its accompanying title in the following way: the image suggests the name of things and provides a clue to read the title. This avoids the syllabic method, which he considers a ‘heavy torture of minds’” (*Orbis* 74) (Grande et al., 2018, p.49).

The publication of texts that have been reissued and reworked many times — texts that originally were not exclusively intended for children — guided editorial decisions in creating children’s and young adult collections starting in the 18th century. In the 19th century, mass circulation of books began; for Mexico, the 20th century represented the promotion of school libraries that differentiated authorial works from school manuals and fostered new ways of reading at school.

I set out to frame a reflection on reading that prioritizes its presence in the school as a social space that should offer, through its libraries, a diversity of works, genres, authors, and everyday opportunities to meet the interests of a variety of readers, and to ensure daily shared reading aloud, to model ways of reading and foster experiences of attention, listening, concentration, and dedication as conditions for developing reading habits that translate into students’ autonomous reading practices.



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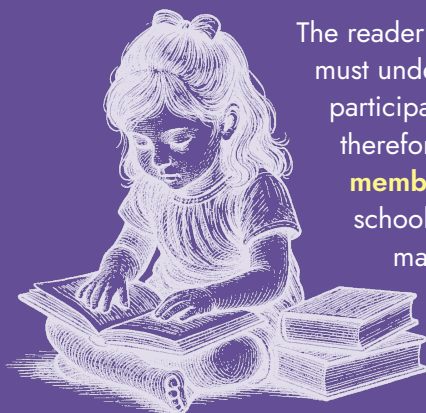
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Closing with a Sociological Look at Reading

Various studies confirm that women read more than men. They also report that while the readers studied began reading at age seven or earlier, this activity is sustained because others read to them, even when they already know how to read. Reading is associated with age, the authors assert, and recognize that as people get older, socialization activities compete with the time devoted to reading (Griswold et al., 2005).

It is believed that conventional reading learning usually occurs around age seven, but we know that even before speaking, babies are great readers. It is important to acknowledge here that the reading activity is sustained because others regularly read to children before they know how to read and continue to read to them even when they do.

FINAL REFLECTIONS



The reader is often seen as a solitary practitioner. But we must understand that being a reader is the result of participating in social groups that read. Reading can therefore be seen as the result of **collective membership**; membership in a family, a library, a school, a social group that treasures reading and makes decisions for the existence of libraries and daily reading practices.



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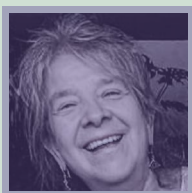


In how many ways do schools express or build this membership?

How many reading experiences different from reading textbooks or school manuals do we encounter during our basic education?

What reading moment do we remember when we felt emotionally engaged with the act of reading?

These and other questions may lead us to recognize the singular expression of our **reading membership** and the commitment to building, from the school, students' reading memberships.



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MEXICANOS PRIMERO is a civil society organization that advocates for ensuring the right to learn for children and youth by driving improvements in Mexico's education policy.



www.mexicanosprimero.org



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