

Literacy Practices of Children and Their Mothers in a Specific Social and Cultural Context: Generating New Social Practices

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This qualitative research is focused on understanding the literacy practices of children and their mothers in a social and cultural context of the state of San Luis Potosí, central Mexico. I will address the results of field work analysis based on the historical cultural approach. I will show how a mother's participation in literacy practices with a group of elementary school first graders detonated their process of empowerment and generated new social practices that arose from the actors in the educational community, through symmetrical relationships between children, mothers and teachers. The main results addressed are the acceptance of a mother's participation in literacy practices in her context; intercultural relations identified in social practices through orality, reading, and writing, with reflection on the social and cultural context of their reality and with the performance of a play; and finally, the generation of new social practices in the classroom and in the context.

Keywords: interaction, cultural context, social practices, literacy practices.

Обучение грамотности в особом социальном и культурном контексте: создание новых социальных практик детьми и их матерями

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Настоящее качественное исследование посвящено практикам обучения грамотности детей и матерей, существующим в социальном и культурном контексте штата Сан-Луис-Потоси в Мексике. Автор рассматривает результаты полевого исследования с точки зрения культурно-исторического подхода. Показано, что участие матерей в занятиях по обучению грамотности вместе с первоклассниками способствовало развитию самостоятельности и уверенности в своих силах у участников образовательного процесса и дало начало — через симметричные взаимодействия между детьми, матерями и учителями — новым социальным практикам. Одним из важных итогов было принятие окружающими возможности участия матерей в обучении грамотности. Также немаловажными явились межкультурные взаимодействия, возникшие между участниками в процессе освоения письма,

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чтения и устной речи, способствовавшие осмыслению социального и культурного контекста действительности и его проигрыванию. Наконец, еще одним значимым итогом стало создание новых социальных практик как в рамках учебного класса, так и в более широком социальном и культурном контексте.

Ключевые слова: взаимодействие, культурный контекст, социальные практики, практики обучения грамотности.

Introduction

I based the article on the field work results of qualitative research from an ethnographic perspective [1]. The analysis presented is based on the cultural-historical theory [21; 23], developed in a specific cultural and vulnerable context, located in the state of San Luis Potosí, Mexico, from September 2013 to January 2015, during the first eight months of which I worked as a teacher and researcher.

The collection techniques were participant observation in an elementary school classroom, subjects' households and their context; conversations with children and adults; in-depth interviews; and compilation of written products. I used a field diary, video and an audio recorder.

The purpose of this article is to show how, through the teaching and learning processes that took place in an environment with symmetrical relationships and with the participation of students, mothers, and teachers, new social practices were generated in the classroom, where schoolwork is understood to be a social practice, as well as literacy practices in the cultural context.

Problem statement

The study focuses on the literacy process, particularly on the dissociation that occurs between the purposes pursued by the school and those sought outside the school environment [12], and on the lack of knowledge of the use of written language in social practices [18; 9], from what subjects do in their cultural context.

Since the students discussed their mothers' experiences in everyday life that refer to orality, reading and writing texts as social practices [9], the *objective* is to know and understand local literacy practices, acknowledging their experience around their culture and including them within the classroom to generate new social practices. The research questions are as follows: *What are the literacy practices of children and their mothers and how are they carried out? How can new social practices be created considering the teaching and learning processes of children and their mothers in their cultural context?*

Cultural context

I carried out the research work in the capital city of San Luis Potosí, Mexico, which has a population of

772,604 inhabitants. Although the population of both sexes is equal, women participate more predominantly in their children's educational owing to their socially and culturally constructed roles.

According to Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), the literacy rate of adults 25 years and older in the state of San Luis Potosí is 95.9% [8], which places us at a high level of literacy; however, in my teaching experience and that of other colleagues, it is common to find mothers who state that they "do not know how to read or write" (in a conventional way), yet participate in literacy practices. Therefore, I envisage a complex and different panorama from that which is stated in the statistical data.

The cultural context is in the Casanova neighborhood to the north of the Capital, which is in a *vulnerable situation* according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) [2]. The characteristics of income inequality and its influence in the social sphere affect Latin American countries, such as Mexico, where about half of the population lives in poverty according to data from the country's National Council on Social Development Policy (CONEVAL). In this regard, four aspects stand out: "unemployment and precarious employment; low, variable or uncertain income; changes in the composition of households and fragmentation of social spaces" [4, p. 4].

Women's labor instability and uncertainty are apparent in the types of jobs they hold as housekeepers, salesclerks, or in informal trade and catalog sales, in addition to performing housework. Most of the inhabitants live in extended families, with difficulty accessing credit for housing and lack of timely access to health services. Changes in the composition of households are evident not only in the physical space but also in the diversity of families, with some women in their second or third relationships and some children under the care of grandmothers.

Social and cultural elements at the local level, present in the reality of children's daily lives, permeate literacy practices. Inhabitants participate in government programs (welfare programs tied to political events); religion (attending Mass and catechism); family (listening to, singing and dancing to specific kinds of music); parties (wedding celebrations and *quinceañera*¹ parties) and women's jobs (sometimes children are involved in the job of their mothers). It is clear that written culture is a social practice; however, little concern is given to the kinds of literacy practices in the school, inside the classroom, where the educational processes

¹ A traditional Mexican celebration of a 15-year-old's coming of age in some communities.

of written language teaching and learning take place, even when the curriculum enunciates an approach to social practices.

An example of the women living in the neighborhood is Ester², who works as a clown and lives with her second partner and three children. She studied up to the second year of secondary school, did not finish her basic education, ran away from home at age 14 after suffering from abuse, stating, "I believe that's why I protect my children so much." She identifies dialogue as a means of protecting her descendants from abuse. In addition, she performs various voluntary reading and writing practices [9], made visible when Marcos, her third child, entered the first grade of elementary school and related her written culture to the classroom. She also participated in literacy practices which detonated her process of empowerment.

Literacy, Social Practice Approach

In current enquiries on language, the debate centers around two positions: one where reading and writing are "neutral" skills, and the other from the standpoint of "practices that generate identities" [13, p.23]. Different approaches to literacy are Literacy and Learning, Cognitive Approaches to Literacy, Social Practice and Literacy as Text: multimodality and Multiliteracy Approaches [19]. I situated the research in the Social Practice approach, in the ideological model [18] when literacy is a social practice and always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. "The ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being" [18, p. 14]. Also, literacy is permeated by power relations [3; 5; 9; 14; 18].

Literacy practices are permeated by historical and cultural factors [22], which also means that it involves interpersonal interaction and relationships with cultural artifacts. "According to Vygotsky, the beginning of human development is a collective (communal, joint) or social activity carried out by or with the assistance of a collective subject in a cultural environment. The mediums of the culture are signs and symbols; it is thanks to signs and symbols that the process of learning and upbringing the individual activity of a person becomes important, and the individual subject becomes clear and then said subject gains individual consciousness" [17, p. 26]. Thus, the literacy is a complex construct that occurs in daily life.

Mothers' knowledge

With the analysis of observations, we hold that mothers have knowledge in their literacy practices in

their social and cultural context. Therefore, in a school meeting we involved the mothers in the staging of a play. We agreed that the children would present "Save Christmas" with "The Grinch", later called "A Christmas in the Casanova neighborhood" on December 18th, 2013.

I asked the lead character, Ester, to confirm her participation: "Yes teacher³, I'll *make a commitment* to you, (...) You'll see, teacher, that when I *make a commitment*, I do my best not to let anyone down⁴". I gave her the script (of Spanish origin, which I got off the internet) and asked her to read it and make any changes that she thought corresponded to her trade. The next day, Ester came: "Teacher, I didn't change the script that you gave me yesterday because I didn't understand it. It was really confusing. I made another one instead. See what you think." She adapted the play adding situations alluding to her daily life.

Together, we corrected the script. She dictated from her notebook while I wrote in a Word document. I paused and asked, "Why did you make a new script?" She replied: "It seemed very confusing and I did not understand it, which is why I preferred to make a new one." When asked her opinion, she replied:

Ester: I felt happy, Teacher, because I had never written like that, just like now. Sometimes I make monologues or jokes in my mind, I tell them to my husband and we laugh but then, I forget them and never write them down. This is the first time I've written like this, *mine*.

Receptivity towards Ester's knowledge implied an approach to teaching and learning the processes that acknowledge that "no one teaches another. People educate each other, mediated by their world" [7, p. 9]. According to Vygotsky, this occurs through the processes of mastery of culturally developed external material, language, and writing in this case.

Commitment is established in the teacher-mother relationship, as when Ester says "when I make a commitment, I do my best not to let anyone down." It is transcendent because "relations between self and others play a fundamental role in Vygotsky's theoretical scheme" [11, p. 25]. In addition, the willingness to live values meant addressing the "development of higher mental functions" which arose from the interpersonal relationship [22].

The adaptation of a text of Spanish origin to the local context

The adaptation shows the script representing the reality of the social and cultural context. I point out a fragment of the Spanish text (Table 1) and another in the local context (Table 2), in which the main contrast corresponds to the type of interpersonal relationships.

² All names of people in this study are pseudonyms.

³ A common way to formally address a teacher in Mexico is to call her "maestra," not by her name; thus, I have translated this form of address as "teacher."

⁴ In this, as in the following casual interviews, I reconstructed the conversations as close to dialogue as they emerged in context. I used simple parentheses () in additions and explanations.

Table 1
 Excerpt. Script of Spanish origin

“Children save Christmas”⁵
María: But they’re our friends.
Laura Navarro: There’s also the evil Grinch!
Miguel Ángel: *We should give him what he deserves.*
Pedro: No, we’re *not like him.*
Ainhoa: You’re right, Pedro. He might deserve a chance.
Grinch: WAAAAA, yes, please... I didn’t want to be bad.
Miguel: Do you promise you won’t ever do it again?
Grinch: Yes, I promise.
Reindeer 2: *We have to submit it to a vote.*
Reindeer 3: Who wants to forgive the Grinch? Those in favor: everyone. Those against: none. Abstentions: zero.
Desi: *The Grinch’s pardon has been approved by absolute majority*

In the play, the Grinch hates Christmas and has kidnapped “Mama Noel’s” helpers. The students release them, and they inappropriately detain the Grinch and must punish him to “give him what he deserves.” He says he doesn’t want to be bad and cries, so the students vote to give him a chance and forgive him because they are good, not like the Grinch, who at least physically could represent another culture and by virtue of the vote is assimilated. This may represent an asymmetrical relationship, in the absence of dialog to understand why the

Table 2
 Excerpt. Script adapted to the cultural context

“A Christmas in (name of school)”
Ana Laura: *I will gather my friends to convince them that the Grinch is good (she runs). Kids! Kids! The Grinch is good, I saw him crying and I know he’s good.*
Jony: No, I don’t think so, he always shouts at us from his window.
Germán: I think Ana Laura’s right: we need to give him an *opportunity.*
Alma: But how will we? He only comes out when the... (*the song “The baker with the bread”⁶ plays*) baker comes.
Jony: I know! We’ll make him believe we’re the people from *Opportunities*⁷.
Narrator: Meanwhile, the Grinch makes a mess in his house. (*Music, a “Los Angeles Azules” cumbia.*) He hears a voice from far away.
Ana Laura: All the *beneficiaries of Opportunities* are invited to stop by for a food ration! (using a megaphone).
Grinch: (Girls dressed as women). Excuse me, ma’am, excuse me. (He goes to the front and is surprised). What? You, girl, I want my food ration, now. (Miss Laura is nearby and turns around). Miss Laura⁸, this girl lied to me!
María: (The girl dressed up as *Miss Laura*) Have the Grinch come forward! And give him his sandwich car.
Ana Laura: mmm. Excuse me, Mr. Grinch, it was the only way to get you out of your house (he turns around, upset).
Gloria: Mister, wait, *we want to convince you that Christmas really is beautiful.*

Grinch behaved as he did and set his fate. However, the intercultural approach “denies the existence of asymmetries due to relations of power” [16, p. 27].

In contrast, the adapted excerpt differentiates the Grinch’s goodness due to his showing his emotions through crying. In a symmetrical relationship, the public school children seek the Grinch out to “convince him” that Christmas is beautiful. Similarly, intercultural education is conducive to “coexistence built on respect for others guided by rules established by mutual agreement” [16, p. 30].

It also shows elements of their daily lives by buying bread with the baker who visits the neighborhood with the characteristic song “The baker with his bread”; by referring to the government’s “economic support” program called, “Opportunities:” “We’ll make him believe we’re the people from *Opportunities*”; by expressing the social practice of listening to music with the melody of “Los Angeles Azules”; and finally by mentioning the reality show they watch called “Miss Laura”. Therefore, the text was rewritten as a practice of real written language [12], as a social practice in a specific social, cultural and historical context.

The production, showing my culture

Ester made the adaptation because she did not understand its content and vocabulary: “Well I don’t get this, it has words I don’t understand and I want to replace them.” She imagined what would happen on stage: “It’s like I have the characters in my mind (...) I changed the children’s voices (...) I imagined it all, (...) the stage as it’s acted out, with costumes and everything (...)” while she was thinking of the audience: “If we’re going to do something, let it be something that people will like and have fun with, because honestly they’re going to get bored, so that’s how I started it.”

Her experiences inspired her; while writing the Grinch’s dialogues she remembered her father, when he did not buy a Christmas tree because “these things are from the United States, they are not used here” She also refers to children, relatives and neighbors for the characters’ features and behaviors, in the way that Garcia Marquez, Nobel Laureate, extracted his characters from “real life”: “almost all my characters are like a jigsaw puzzle put together with pieces from many different people and ... myself” [15, p. 24].

The process involved reading, corrections, rewriting, study, rehearsals and improvisation:

Ester: I read it to you and saw that you liked it... then I kept studying it and I still liked it, before we made corrections, I kept reading it (...) when we were rehearsing it, they kept laughing (...) I danced with the kids, because that wasn’t rehearsed, you remember, I improvised it [she laughs].

So the play performed in the educational community affected her feelings: “People who didn’t talk to me or smile at me (...) started talking to me (...) I feel like I

⁵ Original “How the Grinch Stole Christmas!” (Seuss, 1957).

⁶ The children refer to the song “*El panadero con el pan*” which is played over the loudspeaker of a truck that sells bread throughout the neighborhood.

⁷ *Opportunities* (or “*Oportunidades*” as it is called in Spanish) is a Mexican social welfare program.

⁸ *Miss Laura* is a reality show personality in Mexico. She is known for giving away sandwich cars to women on the show.

made more friends,” so she felt included, which influenced the process of empowerment.

On the other hand, Marcos presented the script prepared by his mother to the classroom:

He approached me and said:

Marcos: I brought the notebook with the script (He turned to his classmates). Who wants me to read the play? (Several classmates raised their hands, and standing in the front, he began to read) Once upon a time, as they say in the stories... (Some of the girls repeated his lines. Marcos kept quiet and observed them).

Marcos: Ah, you beat me to it.

Ana Laura: (Hand raised) Teacher, can we help Marcos read?

Teacher: (Before I could reply)

Marcos: Ah, I know, I'm going to be the Grinch, and since my mom's not here, I'll read it and the ones who are in the play can come up and help.

Teacher: (I watched but did not intervene)

Marcos organized his classmates, was the narrator and those who did not remember the dialogs came to read the script held in his hand.

In that episode I show how children read their cultural context through the script. That is, the process of writing the theatrical script became a developmental tool, constituting a series of symbolic social and cultural characteristics that emerge in the interactions between human beings [22]. In this sense “the principle of developmental tools means that during the experiment, cultural tools should not be given to the child directly; they have to be discovered (found) by the child (in cooperation with an adult or more competent peer)” [21, p. 89].

The spontaneous reading where Marcos imitates his mother inside the classroom (rehearsal and presentation of the play), reading spontaneously with genuine interest, the participation of his classmates who are placed around the theatrical script where one of the girls asks: can we help Marcos to read?, and several classmates stand, are interpersonal interactions through a symbolic means; that is, students can develop the lower natural mental processes of perception, attention, memory, and will in relation to the higher processes that arise from the interaction of the individual with their historical and cultural context [22].

Generating of new social practices

Considering Marcos's leadership and the participation of the classmates that arise in a flexible environment, the role of the teacher was modified, and she was removed as a knowledge giver [6]. Thus, literacy was conceived as a form of participation in the world, not as an end per se, giving rise to a new social practice, understood as the processes of teaching and learning in school.

In addition, the process of empowerment under the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) “takes us beyond the formal education institutions and programs in order to consider how women participate in different kinds of learning thanks to media, social organization, migration, and work” [20, p. 14].

Ester's empowerment engendered a powerful use of written language [14], that influenced the educational community, creating work options and new literacy practices:

Ester: Well... the play might have motivated me to do what I want to do with kids (work as a storyteller), it made me feel more confident, in knowing that *I can do things in addition to being a clown (...)* I said, “Yes, I can.”

Thanks to this, she considered the possibility of expanding her services: “I can do things in addition to being a clown,” and has given a performance as a storyteller. Likewise, she created new literacy practices, voluntarily acting as the “Chilindrina” (a popular children's character) on Children's Day, performing a monolog and staging games (April, 2014); as the witch in Snow White in a storytelling performance with school groups (September, 2014); as “La Llorona” telling a cultural legend; and participating with the group performing for the community (November, 2014); and as the Grinch collecting letters to Santa Claus (December, 2014), among others.

Conclusions

The willingness to admit a mother's knowledge in school, in addition to the use of literacy practices, triggered the process of empowerment that happened through the symmetrical relationship built between children, mothers and myself as a teacher, permeated by the commitment of the actors in the educational community.

The performance, from the adaptation of the script to the context, was the drama; in this sense, “The social relation [Vygotsky] meant was not an ordinary social relation between two individuals. He meant a social relation that appears as a category, i. e. as an emotionally coloured and experienced collision, a contradiction between two people, a dramatic event, a drama between two individuals. Being emotionally and mentally experienced as social drama (on the social plane) it later becomes an individual intra-psychological category” [21, p. 88]. This favored actions such as writing a draft, reading, corrections, rewriting, study, rehearsals and improvisation in the exercise of imagination. Therefore, it promoted the writing and reading of their world and their being through self-reflection in otherness, in family, social and cultural memories shared with the children inside the classroom. This process led to the participation of students in new literacy practices that emerged from the community actors themselves.

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