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The project “Forging Reading Identities”

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Abstract

The Buenos Aires Province is complex and enormous – half of the country’s population lives in its territory- and culturally diverse. It is one of the districts with the most schools, students and libraries in the South America. One of the causes of its socio-cultural problems is the limited involvement of general population with the book and reading. In particular, a lack of reading and especially independent reading is common in children attending the third cycle of EGB.

The 2003 project “Forging the Reading Identities”, developed by the Cultural Institute of the Buenos Aires Province, was linked to other formal educational initiatives in order to try to reduce this sad reality. To carry out the project, training workshop were created for teaching staff, school and public libraries in order to provide them with the tools to encourage children and adults to work together with reading materials, and to articulate the relationship between the school and the library. Over a six-month period and in nine different regions, 800 people were trained.

The majority of these people were teachers and school librarians who had not previously been given such an opportunity. Subsequent evaluation of the participants has been positive. The participants have made recommendations and expect that the project will be continued in the future, with the addition of other related topics. For those who organized the project there is an impetus to continue, to assume new challenges, and to strengthen the program during 2004.

Introduction

Some general facts concerning the project founder Cristina Álvarez Rodríguez.

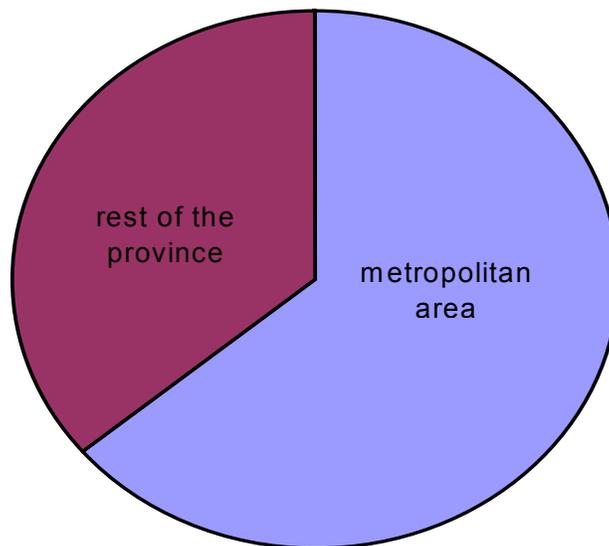
Buenos Aires Province

“Discover the follies which we carry inside is an act of liberation”, Arturo Jauretche, *Manual de zonceras argetinas*, 1968.

The province of Buenos Aires is the first provincial state of the Argentine Republic. It has an extensive territory of 307, 571 square kilometers with 14 million inhabitants: in the inner area some four million people inhabit less than 2% of its territory, and the remaining 10 million live in the metropolitan area of the first and second belts.

	inhabitants	Percentage
Metropolitan	8.832.513	63.91%
Part of province	4.986.164	36.09%
Total Province	13.818.677	100%

Percentage of inhabitants



Historically, the province of Buenos Aires has been the center of political, economical and social events with a major national impact. In its extensive Pampean Prairie, its marine and River Plate Basin, and in the rugged mountain range, can be found a colorful mosaic of customs and populations of ethnic groups with different origins. To this should be added provincial inhabitants and the Latin Americans (Paraguayans, Bolivians, Chileans, Brazilians) who inhabit Great Buenos Aires.

More than 4 million students are enrolled across the five levels of formal education, distributed in a total of 17,000 states and private establishments.

Some 3000 school libraries of primary and middle level form, without doubt, one of the largest groups in the country but their systems can be deficient. Since 2000 the Direction of Culture and Education (the regional Ministry) has developed standards and support at an internal and external institutional level

There are 477 public libraries, which belong to the System of Libraries of Buenos Aires Province and are governed by the Law 9319 and its regulation. They receive a monthly subsidy from the Direction of Book, Libraries and Reading Promotion, which reports to the Provincial Direction of Coordination of Cultural Policy of the Cultural Institute of Buenos Aires Province.

These provincial libraries store, conserve, disseminate and promote about 6 million books and magazines and attend to more than 8 million users annually (according to data released in 2001). These (approximately) 500 public libraries in the province have come to work with great enthusiasm and solidarity, but the work has been done in an unstructured manner with the exception of a few cases. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that these are the only libraries that give a comprehensive service and provide access to books and reading to a huge population of 8 million users.

These institutions wanted the state departments, in this case the Direction of Book, Libraries and Reading Promotion of Cultural Institute of Buenos Aires, to develop a specific policy that would include strategies to strengthen and support the Cultural Educational Institutions that were designed to train staff and users, and to provide an environment for the promotion of the book and reading, by disseminating the role of the library and the book across the province.

One of the main reasons behind this objective was the need to introduce cross-sectoral projects/programs, to structure the different sectors and levels involved in the promotion of reading, and to improve access to educational and public information and popular reading. Bearing in mind the deficiency and virtues of school and public libraries and the existence of reading networks, library cooperation and information exchange, it was necessary to create a specific program of training in order to promote the reading habit in the Buenos Aires Province.

Reading and the Society

Reading, even at a superficial level, is a general concern of all members of society. And the lack of reading habits in school children has already been referred to as one of the major structural causes of our socio-cultural difficulties. Our cultural habits have undoubtedly changed over the years, and it would be absurd to think that reading should be considered with the same sense and meaning that it had during previous decades when the printed material was the only medium for information and communication.

At present, there are other possibilities to access the knowledge contained in printed documents; nevertheless, all that is needed is to do so is a reader and writer. This is the challenge of the school and those who intervene in the vital process of teaching and encouraging reading and writing.

It is vital to develop tools to help children - and why not adults? - to strengthen their reading

habits so that they can catch up with the expected reading levels. In the so-called ‘knowledge society’ of the globalized world the interpretation of messages which grow more complex every day, is a demanding task and this requires a habitual reader with his/her own criteria and who has an awareness of our national and Latin American context.

We are now thinking of the “ independent reader.” This is a reader who is an incessant seeker of the message and aesthetic value contained in each and every book; a reader who can discern rather than simply read, a reader who can fly his/her imagination in order to be both witness and protagonist in diverse situations; a reader who understands, who interprets, who thinks, who reasons, who refutes and reflects.

The great challenge is, then, how do we develop independent readers? And there, the answer, without doubt, is to lay out a vigorous plan of promotion of reading; ignoring all boundaries and from the earliest age, from home, school and from the public libraries. Parents, teachers, librarians, editors, social communicators, all these people are promoters of reading who encourage the reading habit in children not only so that they can succeed in their school years, but so that they become citizens who are capable of giving answers to the demands of today’s society and, and that they develop democratic values and an interest in the common cause. The task of reading promotion demands team work in which all promoters work together to create independent readers. One example of this joint work is the programme “Forging Reading Identities”. In my place of work, specialists have been convened so that assistant technicians and coordinators and institutions involved in this matter can work together in order to design and develop the foundation for this Project and its subsequent implementation.

Development of the Project

“That my tongue be not locked and the words would not fail me either” José Hernández. *El gaucho Martín Fierro*. 1872.

The Cultural Institute of the Buenos Aires Province through the Direction of Book, Libraries and Promotion of Reading which is dependent on the Direction of Coordination of Cultural Policies, implemented the Project “Forging Reading Identities 2003” with the general objective of fostering the reading habit in the third cycle students of basic general education (EGB) by training the librarians of public, popular, school, and education libraries. This Project complemented and accompanied the program “The school read more” of General Direction of Culture and Education with the purpose to promote the reading. And by reading it is understood as the fundamental instrument for social inclusion.

Why Forging Reading Identities?

When the reading habit is awakened in children, one can establish an analogy with the work of blacksmith: the heat of the furnace moulds the pieces to be used later as working tools. All of us who are committed to the promotion of reading, need to forge from the heat of the books the “independent readers”, to be convinced that this will help both academic success and the consequent inclusion of these readers in society, as responsible and insightful citizens.

Starting Point

Educational research, periodical information, and teaching reports all emphasise that at the present time there exist great quantities of information which originating from diverse media; but understanding what we read is another matter.

The results of a survey conducted by the members of this program and applied in the

metropolitan area show that serious deficiencies exist in terms of people's reading habits, particularly their reading habits outside the classroom. Fewer than half of the surveyed students expressed their preference for reading books. And the majority of those who read use only those texts that are part of the school library or classroom collection. Both public and school librarians are aware of this lack of reading aptitude when searching for and selecting student texts.

The absence of reading materials at home, a lack of reading habit among families and the use of free time to spend more than three hours watching television programs, are assumed to be the reasons behind the low number of books read by each child (on average two books per year), and the infrequent use of the public library. It is therefore recommended that the strategies for reading promotion be strengthened, with the intention of bringing students closer to printed materials.

This would fulfill, despite our diverse interests and habits, an essential function for cultural and educational development. The proposed challenge to revert this situation is to promote access to the book, to the storyteller, and to a variety of texts.

And let us not forget what the poet says "The most important aspect of a book is the voice of the author, the voice that comes to us" (Jorge Luis Borges, *Autobiografía*).

Who makes up the team?

General Direction: Professor Daniel Ramón Ríos

General Coordinators: Profesor Ana María Machado
Nélida Moscheto, B.A.

Specialists/Workshop supervisors: Profesor Maryta Berenguer; Profesor Adriana Calvar; Adela Castronovo, B.A.; Profesor Dora Inés Cortón; Olga Lavinga, M.A.; Profesor Stella Melle: Ana Méndez, B.A.; Silvia Paglieta, B.A.

What was the objective?

To train the librarians of public, popular school and teachers libraries in reading activities in order to stimulate the reading habit of students in the third E.G.B. of public schools in the Buenos Aires Province.

What were the expectations?

- to support the development of independent readers
- to collaborate with other programs in reading promotion activities
- to revalue the role of popular and school libraries
- to support librarians' training needs
- to support the work of networks of public, popular, and school libraries
- to use bibliographic and multimedia resources with more efficiency
- to create spaces for dialogue, reflection and debate between librarians and teachers in order to improve the work they do
- to develop the working relationships of librarians and teachers
- to optimize the reading habits of students of the third cycle of E.G.B.

Where was the Project developed?

To have a better understanding of the areas involved in the Project, the following table presents the localities, with the number of educational regions and respective informations:

REGION	LOCALITY/HEADQUARTER	INSTITUTION/HEADQUARTER	Workshop Supervisors
I	La Plata	Central Library Prov. de Buenos Aires	Prof. Ana María Machado
II	Lanús	University and School Council Lanús	Adela Castronovo, B.A.
III	Monte Grande	Municipality of Esteban Echeverría	Nélida Moschetto, B.A.
IV	Ramos Mejía	Cultural House	Nélida Moschetto, B.A.
V	San Martín	Municipality of Gral. San Martín	Silvia Paglieta, B.A.
VI	Tigre	Library “Sarmiento”	Olga Lavigna, M.A.
X	América	Municipality of América	Ana Mendez, B.A.
XIII	Olavarría	Library “Collinet”	Prof. Dora Inés Cortón
XIV	Bahía Blanca	Library “Pajarita de Papel”	Prof. Maryta Berenguer
XV	Benito Juárez	Library “Juan Bernal Torres”	Prof. Adriana Calvar
XVI	Mar del Plata	Cultural Center Gral. Pueyrredón	Prof. Stella Mele

Zona I Central Library of the Province of Buenos Aires “General don José de San Martín, Street 47 N° 510.

Zona II School Council of Lanús, Street 29 de septiembre 1726 1° piso.

Zona III and IV Cultural House of Ramos Mejía, Belgrano 75 y Avda. de Mayo.

Zona V General Municipality San Martín, Belgrano 3747 1° floor.

Zona VI Library “Sarmiento”, Avda. gral. San Martín 440. Tigre.

Zona X Municipality of América.

Zona XIII Library “Collinet”, Alsina 2659, Olavarría.

Zona XIV Library “Pajarita de papel”, Saavedra N° 951, Bahía Blanca

Zona XV Library “Juan Bernal Torres”, Libertad 101, Benito Juárez.

Zona XVI Hall A Cultural Center General Pueyrredón, Catamarca y 25 de mayo, Mar del Plata, Partido de General Pueyrredón.

How did it work?

The work was based on a workshop format in order to encourage free expression, joint reflection and fluid communication between participants, and the development of effective working groups.;

An attempt was made to create a space in which practitioners could meet in order to try, between themselves, to develop valid alternatives. The purpose was to encourage the young people to become active members of society committed to community actions, to be agents of reading promotion, and to develop as competent, independent, democratic and responsible readers.

Basic questions that the workshops attempted to answer

- Why is it important for children to read?
- How can we encourage the reading habits of third cycle students of E.G.B.?

- What texts could be used to motivate the young people?
- How can the family be involved?

What subjects were covered during the workshops?

In order to try to respond to the above questions it was considered necessary to cover those subjects that particularly overlap in relation to the promotion of the reading habit. The workshops and the subjects covered in them are presented below. In each session these topics were built upon and new approaches devised as groups worked together.

Workshop No. 1

- Evocation, nostalgia
- Recovering memories of reading moments
- The independent reader
- The challenge of developing independent readers

Workshop No 2

- The adolescent and reading

Workshop No 3

- Values and human rights in reading

Workshop No 4

- Cultural identity
- Regional and national culture

Workshop No 5

- Integration of all subjects via games

Workshop No 6

- Recommendations for integrating activities
- Evaluation

Duration, timetable and workshop frequency

The workshops were organized during May - October 2003, and held once a month (with a total of six workshops). The duration of each workshop was 4 hours.

Total budget of the Project

(The following does not include staff costs)

Human resources (workshop supervisors)	\$ 8,400
Expenses (Bookstore)	\$ 1,500
2000 pamphlets (Donation) (Approx.)	\$ 2,000
Transportation and traveling allowance	\$ 3,500
Total (Approx.)	\$15,440

Evaluation

The evaluation was longitudinal, and both objective and subjective. An initial diagnostic situational survey was devised and distributed. An evaluation of processes and products was carried out. The evaluation of processes gave us the opportunity to make any necessary changes as the project progressed. The evaluation of products, or the results, allowed us to determine to what extent the proposal objectives were achieved; it also allowed us to analyze the activities and kind of obstacles that emerged. The scope of the results, those unforeseen negative or positive ones, were also analyzed .

At the beginning and end of the activities, surveys were distributed to participants to ask their views of the achievements, difficulties and recommendations for the project. The specialists/workshop supervisors kept a record of activities and presented reports to the Coordinators. The indicators were as follows:

- number of trained people by region
- total number of trained people
- number of people enrolled in the workshops
- number of people who attended all the workshops
- participation in the activities
- profile of the workshop attendants
- number of activities participated in by each attendant
- participation of other organisations
- networking
- information access of those involved in the Project

The quantitative data of attendance by region can be observed in the following table:

Region	Number of enrolled people	Number of people who completed the workshop
I	220 people	160 people
II	65 people.	65 people
III	109 people	100 people
IV	62 people	53 people
V	111 people	111 people
VI	55 people	49 people
X	25 people	15 people
XIII	60 people	42 people
XIV	60 people	55 people
XV	50 people	44 people
XVI	45 people	37 people
Total	822 people	731 people

To analyse these findings in more detail we can observe that in metropolitan regions (colored stripe) the number of attendants rose to just 347 people, whereas in the rest of the province the number was 475, distributed in 7 regions. Those being trained were teachers and librarians in school, public and popular libraries. The majority of participants were language teachers and school librarians, with a smaller number of librarians of public and popular libraries. An increase in the number of teachers could simply have been due to the special cooperation of the school inspection headquarters in each region (for communication purposes), and the fact that attendance of “in-service training” was authorized by resolution (5603/02 and 1357/03)

of the General Direction of Culture and Education of the Buenos Aires Province.

Strengths and weaknesses

Three principal reasons can be given for the low attendance of public and popular librarians (according to the data):

- 1) Lack of communication. Although workshops in libraries were set up in some places, the communication networks were not always effective.
- 2) The difficulty of being present at workshops due to the working schedule. In the majority of cases, potential participants were unable to delegate their work to others and so could not attend.
- 3) The distance that they had to travel in order to arrive at the headquarters; this takes time and involves travelling expenses.

Another weakness of the project mentioned by the people living in the metropolitan areas was the lack of access to texts for their work. This was because the workshops were not conducted in the libraries themselves (given the number of attendants and the need to have adequate physical space), and this obliged them to travel with their own materials.

Nevertheless, it is very important to see what strengths can be mentioned. According to the experts, these resulted in the difficulties being kept to a minimum. The workshop was promoted in all educational regions, and reached teachers of the first, second and third cycle of E.B.G. and teachers of language and other areas of Social Science (although with a minimum number in Social Science). The school librarians had a high attendance rate. This emphasises why the workshop should have been promoted more widely and should not have been limited exclusively to third cycle teachers as originally suggested.

All participants came to the workshops full of ideas and enthusiasm for encouraging students' reading habits. Although the project was addressing the students of the third cycle of E.G.B., other teachers of other levels joined the Project and commented that they were able to use the workshop to find answers to their own concerns regarding the promotion of reading in the classroom. This was regarded as a good idea by the specialists/workshop supervisors as in this way the expression "we only read during literacy hour" lost its meaning.

Many school librarians were present. Public and popular librarians also expressed their concerns in relation to motivating reading habits in children and adolescents. Thus, they met each other, in workshops, full of expectation, in order to search for ways in which to improve their daily work. They worked together to devise strategies for encouraging the students to read for pleasure. Each participant took away an explanatory notebook upon completion of the workshop. The project was entirely homogenous, in other words in all the regions in which workshops were developed, the subjects were the same and the only aspect that was different was the workshop supervisor and way in which discussions developed. The methodology was entirely integrated.

The subjects were developed by the workshop supervisors taking into consideration the personal experience of each participant, and individual working situations were also taken into account. The workshop began by thinking about those moments during which memories and feelings are produced. When did they first come into contact with the book, and when did

they begin to enjoy reading?

During the following workshops, tasks were developed according to individual experiences, and this in itself was a benefit of the project. From every workshop had emerged indicators, based on personal homework or the elaboration of joint projects, which when combined indicated that this project was necessary, that the participants expected something like this for their training, and that it would be a useful means of developing tools to encourage children and youngsters' reading. Many initiatives were developed as a result of the workshops. It was decided to develop an anthology of texts, which was suggested by teachers and librarians; to create interdisciplinary projects with music, theatre and dance teachers; to develop a survey of reading statistics; to create a reading marathon in the school; to host book exhibitions in schools, etc., etc., etc. The teamwork of both experts and coordinators should also be emphasized, as should the permanent support of the project management group, and effective communication channels which enabled the resolution of any difficulties in a positive way.

Vital to the success of the project was the support of the Cultural Directors of the different regions of the Province, of Popular Librarians, of the Federation of Public Libraries of Buenos Aires Province, of the Library Association of Buenos Aires Province, of the local government, in order to develop the project in the respective regions, and of the authorities of Direction of Culture and Education. And finally, the project founder Cristina Alvarez Rodriguez, the president of the Cultural Institute of the Buenos Aires Province, who disseminated the project to each Forum of Cultural Directors.

Evaluation of participants

In each region, the workshop participants carried out a final evaluation and the curious thing was that the following concepts were repeated: the gratitude of school librarians "for taking them into consideration"; the gratitude of all participants for "the shared moments", for "conformity with the selected subjects" and "desire to continue in the year 2004."

The participants, informers/experts and workshop coordinators have made a series of recommendations to be considered for the year 2004.

Participants: To include writers, narrators and editors in the workshops; to include theoretical material about each topic and the need for the trainer to explain each subject during the first part of the workshop; to conduct the workshops twice a month instead of once a month.

Informers/experts: To provide complementary texts (when the workshops are developed beyond the library walls); to develop the subjects, to introduce topics such as: reading comprehension, and how to promote reading from different boundaries of work, etc.

Coordinators: To extend the program to all regions of the Province that were not included in year 2003; to add new workshop trainers in order to raise the profile of each one of them; and to use all possible means of communication to promote the project.

Personally, I would like to thank the authorities of the General Direction of Culture and Education, the Project founder Cristina Álvarez Rodríguez and members of the team who believed in the Project which "is building a path to walk" and has already demonstrated its success.

I would like to conclude this presentation with a motto about reading which I have taken with me for some years now: “READ MORE, IN ORDER TO BE MORE AND TO DO MORE”.

Suggested Basic Bibliography to amplify the subjects treated in the Workshops

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Currículo de los integrantes del equipo

Dirección general del proyecto

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