

# Reading and Writing Practices with a Potential for Transformation. Collaborative Research in School, Hospital, Community and Working-Class Neighborhood Environments

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## Abstract

In this paper we develop a conceptual framework for a collaborative research project called Literacy Practices and their Potential for Transformation. We first explain our theoretical and methodological approach, describing how we constructed a relevant framework over three years of exploratory work. We then analyze four different experiences currently being conducted in the City of Buenos Aires, Argentina. We have identified this set of practices because, taken together, they allow us to a) show the notion of a potential for transformation when linked to reading and writing practices, b) to describe and analyze the central role of reading and writing in very different spaces, organizations and institutions with a common potential to question the established order and transform it, and c) to make visible how these practices appealed to different formats, supports, disciplines, and languages, and in doing so reshaped the very meaning of

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reading and writing. We conclude by underscoring the scope of our study insofar as the analysis of specific experiences leads us to insights on the transformational potential of reading and writing practices, and point out some of the limitations of our study and possible lines of further research.

**Keywords:** reading and writing practices – Buenos Aires – hospitals – schools – social and community organizations.

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## Introduction

### *The potential for transformation through reading and writing*

The practices linked to reading and writing analyzed here and conducted by different groups take place at socio-community institutions or places run by the government in the City of Buenos Aires, such as schools or public hospitals, among others. They are located in environments where the rights of those who participate in them are continuously infringed upon when it comes to their health, education, housing, work, food and recreation. By discussing them we show how they are producing different ways to address the conditions in which these individuals (students, public health care users, and participants in socio-community experiences) live. Therefore, they allow us to point to other possible social rationales. Thus, we present an analysis of reading and writing practices whose overt aim is to promote social transformation.

Since these practices are specifically proposed around reading and writing, it might be argued that their scope of action is restricted in regards to social transformation. However, we will suggest that they constitute a way of reading the world in the sense intended by Freire (1983),

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and therefore they allow us to create different ways to live and to imagine. Our overall question of interpretive analysis has been which are the contextually situated ways in which each one of these experiences supports and develops a potential for transformation, both for the group that carries it out and for the organizational context in which they take place.

Our approach puts up for debate the premise that there is a *correct* reading. Our position is that readers construct different ways to make sense, as well as different ways to constitute each groups into a reading or writing community. These practices, developed and conceptualized in this way, are in tension with others that adopt different names and meanings according to the context, among them the notion that reading comprehension entails a single reading and interpretation of any text being read, or the notion of the strict decoding of letters as the only synonym of reading. Thus, we may identify situations in which certain dichotomies settled into such restricted interpretations, which generate polar classifications (e.g., literate/illiterate), and are not enough to describe the realities that take place in connection with the use of reading and writing. This broadens the field of observation and analysis for different concurrent tools for the production of meaning and symbolic constructions, diversified and mediated by a range of supports and formats (e.g., static or moving images, audiovisual texts, objects, writing in the traditional sense of the term, other types or writings).

Envisaging reading and writing in this way implies that, in order to understand any of the practices developed in the projects analyzed here, we must distinguish the complexity in which they take place. We suggest starting our analysis by taking into account the material conditions and the interactions involved in them.

On the other hand, in the environments we have documented, reading and writing develop together with powers of artistic and recreational creation linked to the use of imagination as a distinct human capacity. In our work, this link between reading, writing, and creating also takes place in a variety of organizations (schools, hospitals, neighborhood organizations, and libraries, among others) and in interpersonal relationships that create new connections among the roles initially adopted (teachers, students, physicians, psychologists, social workers, science and technology researchers, etc.). Thus, transformations take place in the practices themselves, in the individuals who perform them, and in the organizations in which we do it.

In the following section of the paper we will explain our conceptual and methodological framework, based in the New Literacy Studies and collaborative research, and explain our analysis and interpretation criteria. We have adopted the notions of formative potential, transformative potential, and performative potential, linking them to the concept of literacy (Zavala, Niño-Murcia, Ames, 2004; Zavala, 2002). After that, in the Development section, we offer an analytic description of the practices selected. As we present each experience, we will point out the findings that will account for our answers to the overall analytic question. The Results section presents a discussion of the dimensions addressed to bring up the relevant issues stemming from

our analysis. We will also explain potentialities, limitations and questions still unanswered, so as to point to possible research agendas that involve the community, teachers, scholars, and government officials.

In this text we will use *we* to refer to a plural authorship that responds to the writing of twelve people who, working together, generated a shared conceptual framework and proposed ways to analyze each other's work in the production of the collective writing that led to this article. We must also mention that this writing was part of a collectively owned collaborative research project (Heras, 2014). The initiative began in a university in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, after the work of two teams of teachers and researchers who work there. Some of us had also been working with self-organized groups within public-policy initiatives to promote reading and writing. Some of these teachers are also members or direct participants in several of these experiences as neighbors, activity coordinators and/or professionals. The idea for the project in which this research work took place was conceived in 2014 and written down and submitted to the university in 2015.

Starting in 2016 some preliminary activities (contacts, putting together networks of linkages among experiences, a first exploratory survey) were conducted, and the activities of linkage with the experiences began in 2017, when the Program *Humanidades Investiga* was approved. The project continues, although the grant received from the university has formally ended. However, since part of our work allowed us to consolidate the Masters' Degree Program at the UNSAM (National University of San Martín) and Program *Aprendizaje de y en Autogestión* of the Institute for Social Inclusion and Human Development has continued to support our work, it will continue for some time. Throughout the years of development of our project different activities of documentation – complementary to each other – were carried out by those who, through the experiences and the university, wish to do so, following guidelines agreed upon the will also be discussed in this paper.

### *Reading and writing as social practices. The emergence and contributions of the New Literacy Studies*

A school of thought developed in the 1980s that questioned the predominant view that made a dichotomic distinction between orality and writing. For the last two decades, this approach has underpinned the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (see Barton, Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1986; Kalman, 2003; Scollon, Scollon, 1981; Zavala, 2002). Thus, the NLS approach has allowed us to identify writing and reading processes as meaning construction situations sustained by interactions both among human beings and between human beings and objects, artifacts, and representations, as we have explained in previous papers (Heras, Miano, 2018; Miano, Heras, 2015, 2018). In recent years, this conceptual framework has even enabled us to understand and develop new ways of intervening in school different areas of the curricula by inquiring into what *reading and*

*writing* is as a practice situated in a context (López Bonilla, 2013; López Bonilla, Tinajero, Pérez Fragoso, 2006).

Although this line of work had begun to be addressed by applied linguistics on the one hand and by anthropology and sociology on the other, its object of study was either language or languages in themselves. It was not until the late 1970s and early 1980 that both fields of study began to refer to each other and research began to be conducted in places other than schools: socio-communitarian organizations, neighborhoods, interactions in the street, among others, precisely because the conceptualization on what reading and writing is broadened its panorama and its construction of objects of study. What began to take shape in that moment was the possibility of thinking about writing and reading as contextually defined situations in which concrete practices could inform and sustain the ability to interact with specific materials (written letters, spoken letters, numbers or ways of thinking, quantities, etc.) to create meaning. Thus, starting in 1980 a variety of approaches and empirical research began to be developed that allowed us to put up for discussion what we understand by reading and writing, and what can be considered as “reading / writing” in each particular context (see for example Rockwell, 1992, 2006, 2012; Heras, Green, 2010; SBCDG, 1992, 1995).

Something similar happened in mathematics, where even new concepts and fields of study such as the new concepts of numeracy or math literacy, or the then new ‘street math’ as a field of study (e.g. Barta & Brenner, 2009; Frankenstein, 1989; Mills, 1991; Weissglass, 2001) were developed. Marilyn Frankenstein even suggested speaking of ‘critical math literacy’, a similar approach to that of critical literacy or popular literacy in Latin America, and Hirsch-Dubin (2009) developed a number of specific concepts to understand mathematical modalities steeped in ancestral Mayan practices still current nowadays in Mexico and Guatemala, which had thus far not been recognized as mathematical knowledge given the mathematical framework used until then and which the concept of ‘ethnomathematics’ made visible.

In the early stages of these developments there were conceptual borrowings and fertilizations between disciplines and researchers with different approaches. Scribner and Cole (1981), for instance, linked the study of reading and writing to the field of cognitive studies when they began to identify that it was not a matter of more or less intelligence or I.Q., but of how certain cultural practices informed ways of thinking, doing, believing, and observing. Later Rockwell (2006) linked the use of reading to ways of perceiving the relationship with the Earth of some peasant communities in Latin America and showed the complex translations (symbolic, linguistic, and of supports, for instance between a text and a map or between a map and an oral narrative) needed in some farming environments. This put into question what is regarded there as “being literate”.

Thus, and together with other studies conducted at the time and in the following decades in the field of educational ethnography, it became clearer that certain skills (such as making

abstractions, reasoning syllogistically or de-contextualizing something) were not the product of cognitive abilities or literacy but of appropriate ways to act and understand in context. Classrooms began to be studied from this perspective of the generation of contextually situated knowledge (Craviotto, Heras, 2001; Floriani, 1993; Fránquiz, Green, Craviotto, 1993; Heras, 1993, 1995; Heras, Craviotto, Espíndola, 1999, as well as studies conducted by the Department of Educational Research in Mexico, among others.

Other ethnographic studies, more directly linked to reading, writing, and the critical and popular approach, began to underscore that there are different ways to produce knowledge through reading, writing, and even performing. Among the latter studies it was identified that different forms of expression (theater, folk music, and the arts) shape different ways to produce readings of the world (Broyles González, 1994; Heras, 1999), thus broadening what took shape in the field with the new concept of 'literacy' (*literacidad*, in Spanish). The older concept of literacy (in Spanish *alfabetización*, linked solely to the written letter) was definitely too restricted to encompass this variety of views.

Along with these studies, other research conducted in related fields continued to present evidence on the importance of defining reading and writing as contextually situated practices; for instance, educational ethnographies, ethnographies of specific sectors in peasant environments, and studies of the multiple formats and supports associated to what was until then understood as literacy. So it is helpful to highlight the fact that it took a relatively long time (forty years) for the field of Literacy Studies to develop with the aforementioned contributions and in a dialog with other disciplines such as aesthetics, art, visual and audiovisual studies, and cultural studies, among the most influential ones (e.g. Cambre, 2013, Céspedes, Guarini, 1995; Fernández Polanco, 2016; Weschler, 2016). Some of these studies also opened new discussions by putting in tension the concept of Literacy and that of Visual Literacy by considering it too closely linked to the logic of the written letter, different from the logic of visual, audiovisual and performative production and comprehension.

Furthermore, and as we know, the early twenty-first century brought with it a growing interest in positions that integrated knowledge from different disciplines, with the consequent questioning of the single methodologies of specific fields. It was in those years when what came to be known as New Literacy Studies began to find its own place, even though now we may feel that the adjective 'new' might be a bit dated. What was really new then was the integration of different disciplines and fields that were relatively separate until then (ethnography, literary studies, cultural studies, literature), so that they could make different theoretical elaborations and construct previously unidentified objects of research.

The main findings in this field were those linked to the view that the relationships between writing and orality are complex, that they vary depending on the context, that even the same person may adopt different forms in regards to writing and reading according to the context

and the addressees, and that running through all these issues there are underlying questions about the power relationships. This aspect is crucial for this field, and has been studied in depth by many authors from different countries and contexts (speakers of French, English, Spanish and Portuguese, at first, and then of other languages native to the Americas: Wichi, Guarani, Mapuche, and Aymara). What must be underscored as another point of coincidence in this thematic, linguistic, and geographic proliferation, is that it allowed us to verify the thesis that there is a plurality of literate forms, and that therefore each one of these forms acts and is validated in contextually situated social, political, economic and cultural relationships (Bonnin, 2018). It also confirms that all forms of Literacy are placed in a field of possible complementation and synergy, but also of dispute and tensions about the pertinence, meaning, correction or the possibility of being recognized as such. This complex field also makes it evident that gradually there have been connections, hybridizations and actions of complementation of literary genres and forms that at other times in history had been more distinctly separated and institutionalized.

Based on this conceptual framework, we have documented and analyzed a number of practices in hospitals, schools, and social and community organizations in the City of Buenos Aires. An aspect that became crucial was, precisely, adopting this conceptual framework from the beginning in order to have the possibility of identifying practices that take place in very specific contexts but nevertheless count as practices linked to reading and writing that are transformative in a comprehensive way, as we will argue below.

However, as we will suggest, each one of the environments where we are documenting reading and writing practices may be constituted as fields of conceptual and investigative development in themselves; for instance, reading and writing practices in hospital, school, community or neighborhood environments. Our documentation shows that reading and writing practices may make visible aspects linked to the forms of power that often happen in these places, both those that materialize as abuse towards groups of people regarded as “lacking” (lacking culture, literacy, cognitive development, etc.) and those forms that precisely question such hierarchies and become, by being carried out, transformative. The right to the word, in tension with a type of hegemonic and dominant power, seems to be constructed through a certain kind of reading and writing practices that, as we said in the previous section, allow people to read the world (in the sense of the context where we are situated and question it).

## Methodology

In the field of studies on reading and writing there has been collaborative research and reflection on one’s own practice (see for instance Frisch and Stoppani’s compilation 2014, and more recently Marucco’s, in press). We refer to these areas to situate our type of work in regard to both kinds of research since the analysis presented here has been conducted both in collaboration and based on reflecting about each one of the participant’s practice. We also aspire to make a

methodological contribution to the field of Literacy studies from the angle of what can be researched in collaboration and reflection on one's own practice.

In 2014, a team working in a public university of Buenos Aires' urban area began to design a proposal to document and analyze reading and writing practices with a formative potential. At the end of 2015 we presented it to the university where several of us teach and do research. In that formulation we found that some of the research team members were at the same time university workers (researchers) and participants or coordinators of reading and writing experiences in different contexts (schools, universities, cultural centers, self-organized neighborhood collectives, prisons, etc.). Thus, our collective research subject is characterized by being a complex integration of activist-researchers, university students and teachers who want to do research on our own practices and, along with others, on their practices as well.

Our initial design sought to identify working collectives whose approach to reading and writing could be described as *formative* – broadly defined at that time as reading and writing practices, and that at the same time were specific to the literary field – questioned the context into which they were placed to lead to transformations, put up for debate common sense notions of “literate / illiterate” or “reading and writing”, and could be thought of as actions that generated meanings and discourses on justice and access to rights of groups of people usually subdued or infringed upon.

Our project began to be implemented between 2016 and 2017, and in 2018 we linked it to 25 experiences of work with reading and writing carried out in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires in which their participants identified the aforementioned orientation. After the first contact about this project we established different relationships with each collective, with the exception that the first step was the same for all the experiences: we carried out a self-administered survey to, on the one hand, examine some positions regarding the basic notions that our project sought to explore, and on the other hand, find out the degree of interest of the participants in the experiences to carry out collaborative work.

After we established these relationships, we generated different documentation tools that, as a whole, we could describe as follows: in-depth interviews with participants in the experiences and organizations; self-recording and transcription in full of such interviews; review together with the participants of the interviews and later conversations about them; ethnographic recording logs by the participants and ethnographic logs when working with members of the team; visual (photographs, sketches, diagrams, drawings) and audiovisual records. Based on this documentary archive we began to work with the material in successive meetings, in different configurations (small groups and/or the extended group) to distinguish nuclei of meaning reiterated among the experiences, differences unique to each experience, explanatory constructs generated by the experiences themselves in their self-ethnography and ethnography accompanied by the others, and systematization of these nuclei of meaning to generate concep-



tual categories to explore. The process is explained in further detail below.

Also, and through a website still under construction, we are mapping geographically the location of the experiences, referring them to each other, and making them visible (to themselves and to a broader audience). The tools used were reviewed over and over. Thus, the surveys and interviews that were constructed at first as tools for exploration served as the foundations for the dialog, ongoing documentation, analytical exchange that gave life to this article and other collective writings in progress.

Shortly after having made contact with the experiences and in dialog with one of them in particular, the interest in the concept of formative potential arose and it was suggested to change it to that of *transformative* potential. It became clear that *formative*, as an adjective, seemed to have a shaping, *top-to-bottom* bias, as if something external could give shape, educate, and even perhaps exert a sort of defining violence on practices that seemed to have a more dynamic, uncertain and open, and thus (trans)formative potential. On the other hand, the transformative concept included the transformation in those who carry out the practices as equal participant subjects, and not the traditional division of users/professionals or students/teachers. We adopted this approach to continue the work of surveying and analyzing the experiences, adding to this notion the importance of the body in situation, which arose from the first early survey as an important issue to pay attention to. In our conceptualization of the transformative it became important to acknowledge the power of the action and the body in situation, adopting for that the concept of *performative* (Butler, 2017).

Between 2018 and 2020 we carried out a number of repetitive steps:

- Identification of practices by their (trans)formative / (per)formative character, taking into account the contributions made in analytical conversations with the groups.
- Generating work agreements in regard to the notion of collaborative research of collective ownership in action.
- Finding out the meanings that some of the participants in these practices ascribe to reading and writing (through a survey, interviews, observations, e-mail communications and virtual instruments and meetings pre-Covid19).
- Making transcriptions and audio-maps (mapping of the time-code by semantic nucleus, a technic already used in Heras & Miano, 2014).
- Review and analysis of transcriptions and re-writings of thoughts, notions and analysis of situations as a team to construct a multiple-ownership methodology.
- Identification of some analysis categories proposed in dialog, and identification of phrases that became key to guide our understanding of the meanings that participants give to the practices.

- Carrying out periodical meetings of elaboration to focus on the issues that were being identified and to be able to continue making some conceptualizations (besides working meetings about the collective construction of the project's website).

The last three steps had already been used in previous projects (e.g. Heras *et al.*, 2014).

## Development

### *Descriptive analysis: materials, individuals, formats, languages, and infrastructure*

Based on the actions described above, in an open meeting with 25 participants in the experiences we began to distinguish nuclei of meaning. By nuclei of meaning we refer to aspects that participants in the experiences identify as part of the reading and writing practices analyzed here and which maintain complex relationships with each other, since each one of them acquires meaning in relationship to all the other nuclei. We identified the following: individuals who carry out the practices; materials that are constructed in these practices and at the same time created in that interaction; formats in which the reading and writing practices are materialized, and different (oral, written, visual, body) languages involved in them; infrastructure where the practices take place, that is also modified by housing them. Besides identifying and making a descriptive analysis of these nuclei of meaning, we made an interpretation of the forms in which the reading and writing practices seemed to be constructing a potential for transformation as they were carried out from the approach mentioned earlier; that is, as questioning and creating.

Now we will analyze the four experiences that allowed us to make a combined analysis of their activity in face-to-face and virtual encounters between those who wrote this article and those who decided to be part of the writing collective for this text. That is, of the 25 experiences originally studied, there were participants in four of them who wanted to get involved in the writing of this paper, while other writing collectives are still being formed to analyze different aspects of the material studied. The experiences presented here take place in public places and are housed in a hospital, a primary school, a secondary school, and a school with all levels of education (from kindergarten to tertiary teaching institute). Thus, the diversity of contexts is relevant to the analysis presented here. We will now describe analytically each one of the experiences in regard to the nuclei of meaning.

### *Reading and writing practices in the hospital*

This experience takes place in the waiting room of a public hospital, in an ambulatory pediatrics ward to which families bring their children for periodical check-ups. Most of these families live in neighborhoods and settlements near the hospital, while others come from the Buenos Aires urban area, especially the eastern part. In this space, the library "El rincón de los sueños" was gradually created to hold reading and writing activities, playing with objects, songs and words, and corporal expression activities.

Initially there were only short moments that arose spontaneously in the waiting room as a different way of waiting, which through time allowed people to maintain a practice and a conceptualization about the possibility of “taking the floor”. This taking of the floor was identified in a real and in a metaphorical sense, and was documented in situations of intervention in the hospital.

It was after this encounter with the families that an interdisciplinary team known as “Readings in diversity” (with professionals in different disciplines in the hospital) began to take shape. The concept of diversity alluded to the characteristics of the people who go to the pediatrics service, since some families come from neighboring countries and other provinces of Argentina. This was all represented by the use of the plural in the terms “readings” and “writings”, as it appears in the name of the project. In the practices linked to reading and writing conducted in this space people work with words, texts, their body, music, art, sounds, silence, noises and many other supports for expression. ‘Diversity’ also alludes to a divergent conception of work that does not aim to dissolve the tensions and contradictions between approaches but account for a cross-discipline construction integrated by psychologists, music therapists, literature and education teachers (early and primary), physicians, nurses, social workers and users of the health care system. Furthermore, the different team members work for Ministries that have their own rationales: Health, Culture (Culture in Neighborhoods Program) and Education (Urban School Nº 1 and Hospital School). This involves an exercise of assembly, construction of common meanings, while maintaining the specificity of each discipline and area.

### *The “Lobo, ¿estás?” Library*

This library operates in a middle school in the neighborhood of Parque Patricios. Since 2015, inside this school there has been a day care room from the Early Childhood Program that receives children of middle school students, as well as of other students from nearby schools. This room was created to address the need of students to continue their middle school, offering an educational space for the children while their parents study.

Likewise, the student mothers, student fathers and pregnant students benefit from the accompaniment of the Program to Keep Pregnant, Mother and Father Students in School so they can continue their compulsory levels of education. The time spent between the day care room and the middle school revolves around the written, read and listened word, around literature. How can we conceive literature starting from the first months of life of the children, and how can we, at the same time, conceive it with the teenage parents? How can we view literature as an opportunity for the encounter between them? How can we think about the impact of this relationship on the other students and teachers of the middle school?

At the same time, another question arose from the consultation of young mothers and fathers who participated in the experience: “Do babies read?” In this team we assumed that

they do, if we see reading in a broader sense as the construction of meaning: young children are great readers of the world around them, and based on their own reading of gestures and movements, words heard and silences, smells and temperatures, they construct experience. It is a reading that begins to signify through the language and the poetry that lulls, hugs and caresses babies from the moment of their birth. These are the different materials with which we work in the space.

### *Classroom practices. Neighborhood public school*

This experience was conducted in a school in the Villa Lugano neighborhood. The person who carried out these practices (H.) worked at the same school for eleven years (2007-2018), a period in which the school administration changed as often as once a year. For this reason, much of what in other schools is done by the administration had to be distributed among the teachers. This quality of the exercise of institutional power (shared, changing, self-organized) offered the possibility of conducting practices that took place as a unique construction of this school, where it is possible to try out, carry out, think together, among several colleagues and families.

The school is also known in the neighborhood because its students and families face very complex situations linked to difficult access to basic rights such as housing, work, food, recreation, education, and political participation. In that sense, in the neighborhood's social imaginary it is a stigmatized school.

As in other experiences presented, in this school students come mostly from neighboring countries and other provinces. Although the students' life conditions are very difficult, the school seeks to guarantee the full exercise of their rights as far as possible.

Regarding the relationship among reading, writing, and the arts, this school systematically conducts experiences that constitute a collective pedagogical and cultural construction process, such as "Literature in community projects", "Weekly encounters of artistic welcome" (through the community theater, in which fathers, mothers, teachers and students participate together), classroom projects of "Re-telling" folk legends and stories. According to H.'s analysis, the fact that the school administration has been assumed by a teachers' collective endeavor rather than a principal generated the conditions to create these spaces of practice within it where families, students, teachers and not-teachers came together through reading, writing, and the arts.

The formats of these practices and the materials in which they are constructed are diverse and have varied from one experience to another, from one group to another, and from one year to the next. Some continuous features, however, are the interest in integrating several forms of the visual arts to the reading and writing in school (through art works or drawings, paintings, sketches and designs made by the children themselves), the possibility of performing theatrically or physically texts written or read in the classroom or prepared by the families and the school

team, such as plays at the beginning of the day at school, the insistence in conducting activities that allow them to link the inside of the school with the outside through invitations to participate, creating mural paintings or activities in the streets of the neighborhood or incorporating the daily life of the families to school work. The emphasis on the materiality of the visual arts and their different formats and media (watercolor, drawings, ink, collage, gouache, wall paintings, sketches) affords the pedagogical proposal the possibility of experimenting and playing with the material and concrete, often overlooked in health or school environments, both in primary and secondary schools and in tertiary or college education.

### *Reading Counter-Marathon*

This arose from a proposal from a team of librarians and teachers from a teachers' college for higher education in the Almagro neighborhood. This school offers different educational levels: initial, primary, secondary, as well as early and primary education. The building is shared with two other institutions of secondary education, and in the second basement there is a library, shared with the aforementioned institutions.

The name of the experience is defined in tension with other experiences that propose to have "reading marathons", linked to individual competition. In contrast to this signification, the Counter-Marathon is proposed as a collective invitation to single, personal and shared readings, promoting a sensitive appropriation of the reading and writing experience.

Reading is not a race because it requires time, readers, and exchanges. For this reason, it was decided that it would last more than one day without setting this down beforehand, so its different editions (between 2014 and 2019) varied between a week and four months. During that time there are reading and writing proposals that invite participants to stop, to read at a different pace.

In these experiences, the library team coordinates the activity together with the teachers of different levels and students training to become teachers who offer their proposals personally or as part of a class. In this sense, it is an opportunity for the school to be a meeting space through reading and to dynamize the roles established since, in fact, all the participants become readers and it does not matter if they are teachers, students, adults, children or adolescents because the focus is on reading, enjoying reading, socialize what is being learned and proposing novel ways to do it.

The reading and writing practices of the Counter-Marathon are fundamentally literary and take place at the crossing of different languages and supports. Verbal language appears when reading aloud a written text, voiced in different ways; writing, in paper become toy, as in poetic paper planes or the questions in a book by Neruda, or printed in posters that remain on the wall; audiovisual language, which combines different languages with the oral and the written language, music, the theatrical in these scenes, are some examples of these crossings.

## Interpreting the potential for transformation in subjectivity and institutions

In order to discuss the notion of transformative potential through the experiences studied, an aim already stated at the beginning of this paper, we have presented above an analytical description of each experience, situating each one in its context and complexity and taking into account the nuclei of meaning explained in the section about our methodology. We will now delve into an interpretive analysis, describing points in common, and then present some results in regards to the question of in what (contextually situated) ways these experiences sustain and develop a potential for transformation, both for the group that carries it out and in regard to the organizational context in which they take place.

First, in regards to the points in common, those identified as the subjects of the practices include both those who design and implement them as their beneficiaries, thus constituting an heterogeneous set made up of users of the health care and the educational systems (from babies to students of the tertiary level), families (with different configurations), teachers, psychopedagogues, librarians, among others. In principle, this heterogeneous relationship between the usually called “users” and “professionals” takes place within each experience. However, in our research work we found that many of these spaces know, refer to and communicate with each other. By starting work on the project presented here, furthermore, other modes of systematic exchange between experiences were constructed that, as we said at the beginning, are also characterized by the fact that those who carry them out assume simultaneously different roles. For instance, we participate in socio-communal experiences in our neighborhoods associated to reading and writing, and we are also teachers in different educational levels (primary, secondary, tertiary, and college), or we work in the public sector (health, education, hospitals, social work in neighborhoods) and carry out reading and writing experiences in those environments and at the same time in our communities. The fact that the definition of the subjects involved encompasses this variety allows us to come up with a notion of collective subject generated after an encounter between people, beyond the formal roles played in these practices (teacher, student, physician, patient). Within the organizations (hospital or school), this fact generates a questioning of the habitual discourse modes: for instance, stereotypical ways to start conversations between physician and patient, teacher and student, family and health care or educational institution.

Secondly, to continue with the similarities between experiences regarding the materials, languages and formats involved in the practices, we observed a great diversity: orality, silences, gestures, visual language, poetry, music, art. Since reading and writing take place in a multi-textual way, these experiences are reshaping the notions of reading and writing themselves.

Finally, in regards to the infrastructure, we identified that the experiences are often shaped by the confluence of different governmental programs and are part of a complex web of institutional links and belongings, between which they seem to offer practices that run across through

a particular exercise with reading and writing. Therefore, we are in the presence of novel ways of conducting public policies, since the collective subjects that carry them out reshape them in their daily work.

### Transformation of subjectivity through reading and writing

In the experiences analyzed, reading and writing practices are linked to the possibility of constructing narratives, imagining other possible worlds, inaugurating other forms of sensibility in which the body occupies a central place. They are characterized by openness to the uncertain, listening to and reading what is happening at every particular moment. In the experience "Readings in diversity" this form of working becomes an approach open to listening and people are invited to read and play starting from the idea that we all someone's *other* and seeking to deconstruct the notion of a *stigmatized other*. The game proposes an implicit pact linked to deploying different outlooks, actions, movements, creations, faced with a reality that may seem to be established: professionals/families, health/illness; Argentines/foreigners, between some of the interpretive referential and common sense schemes that take place in the hospital. Multiple reading possibilities of the same event open up through the activities because we are working with children, families, and professionals together, narrating or re-narrating what is not at first put into words, or what might arise as unexpected. This demands an active listening by those who coordinate the space, an opening of the senses to capture what is happening in that moment and be able to *read it* in the interactions so as not to interfere with their deployment. The team calls this practice "the possibility of working with what is taking place".

Something similar happens in H's school when he refers to the work done with his students and the possibilities of opening a space linked to playing and imagination associated to narration, since he has identified that reading produces an "active calm that beat awake in the children, who were 'lost' in their imagination, an interesting function for literature in school". In the words of the teacher who carried out this experience, "it seemed as if they were sailing away, and they laughed, made comments, got excited, shared. The garden of sensibility bloomed with all its petals. It worked also because no one asked "Teacher, why are you reading that story?" or "How does it help me to listen to literature?" It's no use trying to measure how it works. You cannot quantify excitement. It's impossible to put sensibility or transformation of consciousness in numbers. Although we have no empirical record, we know that something happened, an event took place. Potential became action."

That is why reading is a possible interpretation of what is happening, both for those who coordinate the activity and for the children who participate in it. In this way, an opening to the other dimension of reality where people talk and play comes into being.

The participants in "Readings in diversity" refer to these states as "shared daydreaming". These experiences aim to encourage readers to work in that dimension that resembles what writer Julio Cortázar defined as fantastic:

There are some sort of small parentheses in reality where a sensibility prepared for that kind of experiences feels the presence of something different, where one feels, in other words, what we may call the fantastic. [...] the rules of logic, the causality of time, of space, all that our intelligence has accepted since the time of Aristotle as immovable, secure and still, is suddenly shaken, as if moved by a sort of inner wind that displaces them and makes them change (Cortázar, 1982).

It is an encounter that does not seek effectiveness but the expression of subjectivities. An event that we can perceive as beauty, for when an experience is sensible it moves body and emotion, touches the vital, surprises us, and becomes an act of beauty (Martínez, 2016).

In consonance with the ludic dimension alluded to, the Counter-Marathon appears to be constant in the different editions of this experience. The ludic aspect is central to the reading and writing practices proposed, and is often combined with the circulation in spaces not foreseen by schools. These aspects acquired special relevance in the closing of the 2016 edition with the "Poetic airplanes" experience, which also called for collective work between students of the teachers' college and librarians, who folded the paper planes and took them in a basket to a seventh grade classroom together with a selection of poetry books. The children were invited to read them and choose stanzas, songs, limericks, or any verses they liked to write them on the paper planes and then share them with the younger children in the school. Armed with the *poeticized* planes, the children in seventh grade walked to the second floor terrace, where they spend their recess, and waited for the hour when the first and second grade students were in recess to launch the planes. A little surprised, but excited and shouting, the little children received the paper planes in the schoolyard and although at first they paid no attention to the texts written on them, after a while they began to read in groups the poetry that had flown towards them from the terrace. These ludic experiences, where the body is in play, broaden the symbolic as well as the real space, showing other ways in which the school can be inhabited.

Since the Library "Lobo ¿estás?" caters to very young children and their parents, its literature is linked to the utterance of the children's first words and the student parents' construction of their identities in the dual role of being adolescent parents as well as students. To this exercise of their roles is added the experience of a different relationship with books and images, remembering experiences from their own childhoods and constructing new ones in which reading questions and moves them in other possible ways. Words cover narratively the silence that introduces the dialog, the closeness of a bond that accompanies and sustains lovingly, the metaphor that allows for their encounter and acknowledgement with themselves through the *other*.

This openness to another dimension of reality linked to daydreaming, to being *lost*, a loving encounter, to the ludic, is what enables the transformative possibility of subjectivity in these experiences. H. speaks of an emancipatory process linked to reading literature, since there are figures of intellectual activity that reading fosters: for instance, anticipation (a prediction made



by articulating the clues found in the text) or the attribution of meaning (an interpretation, a production, a creation, which is a product of collective reading).

Definitely, reading involves taking on a challenge. There is something to be solved, to decipher, a puzzle – although it may not have been posed as such. Reading is placing oneself in an active position of work and artisan, not commercial, production. Interpretation is work, putting together. And its production is a joint effort: one reads with the others and thanks to the others. It is the fabric of the community workshop. Placing oneself is emancipating because the individual *knows that he/she knows*, is aware of his/her capacity to understand and produce. One does not receive passively, as if one were an object, as if one were the depository of an external consciousness. One inserts oneself thus into the stage of history as a protagonist, the leading actor with a story to be written. Alienation is the detachment from desire. An alienated person is one who has no contact with his/her desires, with his/her sources of pleasure. Literature can also repair that link, so it is also dis-alienating.

In “Readings in diversity” there is also a relationship with the emancipatory. The purpose is to create a space of freedom for each participant to narrate himself/herself from another place, perhaps different from where others place him/her. This process is called in the group “the advent of the subjective”; that is, a becoming of each one of those singularities, those stories and those genealogies as well. Thus, the narrative is linked with the individual’s subjectivity and the possibility of constructing other, perhaps unexpected, stories.

In the “Lobo ¿estás?” Library, the transformative character of the literary is clear. A space is opened for the narrative and the poetic to circulate, to inhabit those bodies, to open fictional horizons so life itself is transformed, or at least tries to. In the construction of the reader’s road, the duty of the Library is to offer different spaces and alternatives so that the students may link themselves to the literary word in all its meanings and may transcend the dichotomies between reading as a school obligation and reading for pleasure. Thus, the “Lobo, ¿estás?” Library seeks to transcend this dichotomy, to tension the idea of the existence of a literature for adults and another literature for babies and children, and to vindicate the place of the image in readings for adolescents and adults.

The design of the Counter-Marathon as a situated practice, willing to act with others and have others act in that situation, open to randomness and to the surprise of the readers, questions teachers and future teachers as mediators, and demands that they think of the children not only as mere receptors, but as constructors of their own and of collective meanings, as the very makers of encounters.

We believe that the ludic experience and the spatial journeys describe involve broadening the experience and changing the position of individuals. To provide an account of the multiplicity of ways to learn to read of those who participate in these experiences, we will describe now a situation that took place in one of them:

A sixty year old lady came with her grandson to the service. He entered the library and said “This is where I first played an instrument! Now I have a ukulele”. Passionate about the history of Argentina, he borrowed Pigna’s graphic novel and his grandmother began to tell me that he loves to read. I invited her to explore the library and she became enthusiastic with a book that she also borrowed. She told me that she had never been to school, that she only went there to eat, that she had been very poor as a young girl and because she had “other thoughts” she ran away from class, but that she learned to read on her own, looking at magazines. She realized that one letter after another formed words, and learned to guess their meaning by their context. I asked her if she was interested in any poetry book and she said “No, thanks, I already read a lot of that, I prefer this one”. And she took a novel.

Based on what has been said so far, we argue that these experiences allow us to see the (contextually situated) ways in which the potentials for transformation are sustained and developed. It also allows us to maintain the notion that this transformation is a permanent representation, and with that notion we may then also show the performative potential of this type of educational, artistic and organizational positioning.

### **Questioning the institutional context**

As we mentioned above, most of the experiences take place within complex institutional networks because they have different ownerships (since their positions are supported through different governmental programs or departments) and even different trainings and discipline practices. What they have in common is that to some degree they manage to transform both the team that carries them out and some hegemonic rationales present in the institutions where they take place. For instance, “Readings in diversity” is part of the hegemonic health care system. We believe that it has an effect of transformation on the culture of hospitals: the narrative inside the doctor’s office changes because those who go to the service and participate in the activities conducted in the library begin to have a different position towards the physicians and value their own narrative better. Achieving this has taken over 20 years, which is the time that this experience has been taking place in this health care service. There is now an acknowledgement that the space has to do with a specific way to offer this health care service. Despite this, it has sometimes been seen that the families that come to this hospital, and in particular to the ambulatory pediatrics service, perceive two different spaces: the doctor’s office, with its own forms of interaction, and the library. We realized this when a child that was doing an activity in the library and heard a doctor call him told us “I’m going to the other hospital”.

In the case of the classroom practices in H’s school, at the same time as the primary school isolation is questioned, the teacher’s subjectivity is transformed. One of the issues that always concerned H. is the one that links learning in the school with learning in daily life, both for educators and for students and families. Thus, H. tried to form groups of work and reflection on

the teacher's practice, or participate in sporadic moments of encounter with other workers in culture and the arts, wondering what relationship we can find between learning to read texts and learning to read the world, what aspects of reading are linked to the arts, to aesthetic enjoyment and the construction of ways to interpret (works of art or other issues) that allow us to expand what we know. Based on these questions, he contacted other colleagues in the same school since the institutions we inhabit, due to their organizational structure, tend to isolate us. Especially in connection to reading, writing, arts, and school, H. and his "primary school" carried out several experiences that he describes as a "collective pedagogical-cultural construction process".

As for the "Lobo ¿estás?" Library, its presence in the day care room of a middle school encourages encounters. Its aim is an institutional coexistence centered fundamentally on reading. The library materializes one of the aims of the educational project of the day care room, which is to work in an articulated fashion and together with the middle school. This aim is assumed with the intention and the conviction of generating work spaces that involve and bring together teachers of different educational levels, in this case initial and middle, pupils of very different ages, as well as an interweaving of relationships that link motherhood, fatherhood, schooling and upbringing.

In regard to the Counter-Marathon, the possibility of taking the time to read in different ways puts into question an idea of reading that the marathon somehow represents: reading lots of books to win a competition. In another sense, the collective construction of the project, the movements in regard to fixed roles, the active position of different participants, circulating by not habitual spaces, lead to questioning what can become a habit in an institution, rigid places, loss of meaning. The organization of the Counter-Marathon always tries to be an invitation to read and not an imposition, and for this reason pays special attention to the opening activities, seeking a kind of "distancing" from order, as Graciela Montes (2007) says, with the aim of generating desire, provocation, or bewilderment.

## Results and new questions

In the previous section we already outlined some relevant issues to continue deepening this approach to analysis that takes reading and writing as situated practices that, under certain conditions, enable the people who participate in them to construct multiple meanings, new readings of reality, new narratives, different positions towards what is taken as a given. These intersubjective movements, which in themselves question certain modes of the social in the institutions and organizations in which they take place or with whom they interact, are seen as continued, indeterminate and open processes. At the same time, we believe that the very reflection on their practice, description, and analysis allows us to have a theoretical approach to

the relationships between reading, writing, organizational creation and change. We will now go into further detail about some aspects to be discussed.

As we have said, the reading practices to which we refer deliberately assume that reading implies an interpretive activity. In the analysis of the experiences appear several meanings of the term reading that we may relate to the theoretical framework of the NLS, which in their first formulation follow Freire: reading the world. We assume and seek to promote in the readers an intense activity in the construction of meanings not only of written texts and images, but also of readings of reality, of events. Those who accompany younger readers, children or babies read what is happening. Something akin to stopping, watching, being open, supporting, listening to the other, is put into play, producing sensible readings. In this sense, the scenes retrieved in the interviews come from a reading open to being surprised.

Readings are produced collectively. We read with a different other, in the logic of a collective construction where a plurality of different meanings are incorporated and articulated. "We read with the others, thanks to the others" as H. says.

The crossings and encounters of different participants that enrich the readings appear in all the experiences. In "Readings in diversity" it is maintained starting from its formulation: there are common constructions of common meanings supporting the specificities. Thus, professionals from different disciplines and ministries with different rationales, children and their caretakers who come from different cultures, create something new within the hospital and in the neighborhood activities later developed after the experience. The Counter-Marathon is defined as a collective construction in which individuals from different educational levels and different roles come together. In "Lobo, ¿estás?" different institutions and programs, adults with different roles and teacher training, babies and adolescent mothers or fathers with the tensions inherent to the institutional frameworks where they interact meet.

In some of these experiences the essay *La gran ocasión. La escuela como sociedad de lectura*, addressed to teachers, librarians and other mediators of reading who shares many of these convictions, has been alluded to. In it, with poetic language, Graciela Montes (2007) defines reading as "greed for meaning", and the position of the reader as one of "insubordination and desire". The subtitle anticipates that the school is an opportunity to produce this kind of readings. There is no depiction of the lonely, romanticized reader, but of the opportunity for exchange, for construction in the difference of voices. These conceptions of reading put in tension a school tradition of narrow comprehension that would have the readers "learn by heart" or "repeat with their own words" the text. They also challenge other, more contemporary versions of the same position, which become manifest in international evaluations. And finally, they also challenge and tension a certain widespread version of the "freedom of the reader" often confused with a "soft subjectivism" (Larrosa, 2008) which would lead to an extremely individualistic posture like "reading is subjective".

Finally, another aspect that appears very clearly is the importance of the ludic as a means to produce new readings for their power as a symbolic language and their relationship with the arts. Play shares the fictional character of literature, opening the possibility to enter another world and another dimension that requires a different time and sensibility. Literature is valued as a privileged reading because it opens fictional worlds. The four experiences make the value of the literary text clear. Collective encounters where play, literature and other arts produce readings and writings, support the emergence of one's own word and that of the others, recognizing different and multiple authorships, new narratives, a new way of telling and taking a position.

So far we have mentioned some relevant issues that emerge from an analysis of the four experiences presented. We may argue that our approach, which sees reading and writing practices as constructions of transformation in continued, indeterminate and open processes, also allows us to identify subjective and intersubjective transformations, while they alert us about the transformations in the organizations in which they take place. Therefore, we note that this framework allows for a theoretical approach to the links between reading, writing, organizational creation and socio-political change.

In our work there is evidence that shows that the subjective transformations produced by this kind of activities are questioning socio-political structures. This evidence might be overlooked if we did not appeal to an analytical framework such as the one constructed for the interpretation of these practices. For instance, situations where the movement being produced in interaction is brought to the surface so that it allows the individuals involved to construct modes of linkage different from those to which they are usually subjected, which in the cases we have studied are often modes of naturalized institutional and structural violence. We argue that the approach adopted for our analysis allows us to take into account this evidence as it is, not as a casual anecdote or circumstance.

Nevertheless, we understand that a limitation of our study is that, in order to carry out the long-term ethnographic work that allowed us to continue corroborating how such questioning of structural violence takes place, we would need to conduct a study at other times and have the resources for an in-depth survey. Furthermore, the current conditions of the pandemic have imposed severe restrictions on that kind of methodologies. Although we are generating other methods to continue the work conducted so far, the world as we knew it is changing and we are still in the process of stabilization of different forms of production of transformative action and knowledge about it.

An in-depth study over a longer period will allow us, within the new paradigms we may generate to produce knowledge collectively, to incorporate further material of direct observation by the different members of the team, which we consider important for two reasons: the first, because our hypothesis is that we could gather more evidence about how the transformations

and questionings of the dominant system take place, even – or especially – in times when the pandemic has exposed situations of deep injustice that in other times might be less visible; and the second is that we might even understand how such transformations may occur in other environments that are different and more challenging, but with situations similar to the ones observed through these experiences.

Also, and linked to the above, another limitation we found is that long periods are required to establish linkages like the ones we have achieved in this work of joint inquiry, periods that are not always available to everyone and that are usually obtained through a high degree of exposure to long hours of work. Although this is common for those who work in public spaces like all the authors of this article, that does not make it less difficult and – sometimes – alienating. Thus, the will to think together and theorize based on our experiences has overcome the difficulties of time and space, even in contexts of high vulnerability. We find it precarious that conceptualization work such as this depends upon our will.

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