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Comfenalco - Medellin libraries and their commitment to reader formation

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Abstract:

In the context of Medellin, a Latin American city that at present is going through some complex social, economic and political circumstances, an experience of work in reading promotion among children and youngsters in a public library net is presented.

The actions presented, setting out from the understanding that the challenge of the public library is to go out in search of readers, are exposed in four major fields: Activities directed at multiplying access possibilities to books; formation activities with parents, teachers and young people, with the purpose of creating favorable environments for reading; activities motivating reading and cultural information, and activities with the media.

The supply of public libraries and library services for children and young people is not an old and well rooted tradition in Colombia. In such matters we can say we are relatively new. But the city of Medellin, if compared with the rest of the country, stands out as presenting some differences in the way public library services are offered. To give an idea of this point, I will mention some facts I consider account for the difference: whereas in many cities lending books for take out are still a novelty, in our city it is a well recognized and established service, demanded by the people; while in most of the Colombian libraries books are still kept in closed bookcases, in our city a library is not conceived in which reading materials

are not free for the public to manipulate and browse through. On the other hand, it is a city distinguished by the efforts made by the communities, especially those of low income, to have library services at hand, and by the support given by private enterprise to initiatives related with books and reading.

Two facts taking place in Medellín during the 50's contributed to a great extent to the development of an interesting working philosophy of public librarians; however, this does not mean that there is a sufficient infrastructure, nor that the whole population actually receive the services it requires. The two facts I am referring to were, in order, the creation in 1954, on part of UNESCO, of the Pilot Public Library of Medellín for Latin America, and the foundation, in 1956, of the Interamerican School of Library Science of the University of Antioquia, with the support of the OAS and the Rockefeller Foundation.

In this very same city, in 1954, Family Compensation Entities came to life, a unique Social Security experience, peculiar to Colombia. A brief explanation follows stating what they are, so as to make it possible to put in context the experience of COMFENALCO libraries and the formation of readers that is the subject matter of this paper.

Family Compensation Entities are private non-profit organizations existing in Colombia since the 50's. They receive contributions from both private and official enterprises, which by law must pay a special tax dedicated to the social security of their employees. This money is received by the Entities and distributed in the form of monetary subsidy among low income workers; the remnants of these contributions are invested in health, housing, education, recreation, tourism and public library services.

Thus, an ample sector of Colombian public libraries is financed by this tax, paid by companies to the Compensation Entities. Library services are therefore considered one of the components of social security, by being included under that vast range of services associated with the well-being of the population, which include health, housing, education, recreation. In other words, this means that the right to receive information, have access to reading materials and to enjoy cultural activities is conceived and understood as a factor contributing to the improvement of the quality of life of people. Maybe in countries with long library traditions, such as Anglo-Saxon or Nordic ones, this is taken for granted, but in other societies it becomes an important achievement that sets the foundations for public library work.

The experience of working with children and young people that I will now present is that of COMFENALCO, one of the Compensation Entities in Medellín, Colombia, which owns a public library network since 1979. It develops a local activity, in a Latin American city that is experiencing complex social, economic and political conditions, perhaps more complex than those suffered in most cities of the region.

Saying goes that Colombia is a country that is in an intensive care unit. Its ailments are serious and of diverse nature; to mention only some of them, 56% of the population lies below the line of poverty, the distribution of income is inequitable and unjust, unemployment reaches 25% of the population, the quality of education has been decreasing ostensibly in the last decades, the conditions of child labor are appalling¹, and furthermore it must be said that all Colombians, whether living in cities or rural areas, without distinction of age or social class, live with a feeling of fear and uncertainty, due to the extreme conditions of violence of daily life.

¹ Según estudios de UNICEF hay más de 1.5 millón de niños colombianos explotados laboralmente. Cerca de 1.1 millón son parte del éxodo de población desplazada, sin un acceso adecuado a los servicios de salud, alimentación, vivienda y educación. Hay 7.000 niños soldados combatiendo en la guerra en Colombia, 4.000 combaten con las Farc y 3.000 lo hacen en los frentes de las autodefensas.

One of the factors most decidedly contributing to conditions of inequality among Colombians is without any doubt the difference in quality between public and private education, the latter being in a highly advantageous position as opposed to the former. School library services in Colombia are usually found in private educational establishments, in which it is also more common to find professional personnel in charge. In the public sector, on the contrary, the instances of good libraries are exceptional, and many schools have an absolute lack of this type of service. Therefore, it is the public library that takes over the position of serving as a school library for people belonging to low income groups, who generally attend official or public schools.

Without fear of exaggerating, we might say that from 70 to 80% of our users are children and youngsters who visit the library in order to solve school tasks. In other words, ours is a library that, though called public, is used as a school one. At the Comfenalco library we have taken up this special and peculiar circumstance, assuming two challenges that should let us reach a different scenario in the future, thus making it possible to fulfill the role of a true public library. The first challenge I am referring to is the motivation of students who visit us. We want to create in them the need of using the public library throughout their whole life (and not only during their educational cycle), not only by fulfilling their academic needs, but also by letting them experience that the library meets their cultural and information interests and, most important of all, by implanting in them the pleasure of reading. The second challenge is to work with teachers and motivate them to start their own school libraries in their educational establishments or demand their creation. Those two challenges have served as the foundation on which a large part of our activities are modeled and configured.

In a society full of inequalities, contrasts, and injustice, work among librarians cannot be identical, not even in libraries located in the same city. Ours is a work of small dimensions; most of the things that I will tell you are done in a small scale, carried out in reduced groups, some of them very experimental. Since everything does not work everywhere because communities differ and one gets to them by different means we try to have very agile services that allow for variation, innovation and change.. Although the institution in which they are framed has a complex and often rigid structure, in the daily praxis of neighborhood libraries we strive to achieve that permanent personal, human and special touch. As Genevieve Patte suggests, we try to keep small structures inserted within larger ones.

The different environments, the neighborhoods where libraries are located, their particular conditions, have modeled and conformed the strategies which are now to be presented. Some of them are traditional ones, others are peculiar and original, born out of specific needs. Each has its own dimension and corresponds to a working stage aimed at providing people with reading and information.

Our activities for children and youngsters can be divided into four large areas:

1. Activities aimed at multiplying access possibilities to books among children and youngsters
2. Activities for the formation of parents, teachers and youngsters, with the purpose of creating environments prone to reading.
3. Activities aimed at encouraging the approach of children and youngsters to books and reading by means of actions that stimulate reading and cultural information.
4. Activities with the media in order to motivate society in general to read.

1. Activities aimed at multiplying access possibilities to books among children and youngsters:

We set out from a premise: without reading materials there are no readers; however, it is a known fact that, though reading materials are a necessary condition in the formation of readers, their mere existence does not guarantee the achievement of this objective. Therefore, endowing a children's or juvenile library room with varied, updated materials adapted to the necessities of the community is critic, but not enough.

Having ample spaces, attractive furniture, appropriate schedules and access facilities is an ideal, but it is not enough. Having trained and committed personnel is vital, but it is not enough either. The great challenge of library services with regard to reader formation is not to be happy with just that privileged group which, for some reason or other, makes use of the services the library offers, is acquainted with them and enjoys and frequents the library.

With that group of captive users, made up of many children and a smaller number of youngsters, we will obviously continue working. But we know that we should do more and that our greatest endeavor is that of designing services, activities and programs that, systematically and intentionally, get to that other major sector of the child and juvenile population with no knowledge about the existence of libraries or about the possibilities opened by reading. In other words, our challenge consists in going out in search of readers.

This is why we try to carry out a considerable part of our activities in places external to the buildings that house our libraries, and locate them in places frequented by children and young people: parks, streets, schools, etc. The following are some activities of this type:

Traveling boxes. Collections of 50 books lent to schools lying within the scope of each library, or left in towns far from urban centers. Previously, Traveling Boxes were made up of permanent collections predefined by us. We realized that needs varied and that quite frequently not all the materials were used; we then decided to make them more flexible and to conform them according to requests made by teachers; therefore at present they consist of poetry materials, popular tradition, theater, books informing on a certain topic, etc. A Traveling Box is a strategy that gives children access to good reading materials in the classroom. Though they are not meant to replace a library, under our current conditions of violence and insecurity, in many marginalized sectors of the city they have become the only option children have of gaining access to reading materials. Teachers often express their fear of letting children go out onto the street or of taking them to the public library, as they used to.

Our Traveling Box program also extends to factories and enterprises, as a service for their workers. In the collections we send, books for children and young people are usually included, with the purpose of having them taken home by the workers, to share with their children.

With the money of the Guust Wesemael prize that was granted us last year, two primers are now in preparation, one of them for adults and another for children, containing guidelines on how to make a better use of the collections in the Traveling Boxes.

That of the **Park Book Stops (Paraderos Paralibros Paraparques)**, known as PPP, is a book lending program located in a park or a public space, with the purpose of satisfying the recreational reading interests of children, youngsters and adults. This service was conceived by the Foundation for the Development of Reading in Colombia -Fundalectura-, and Comfenalco offers it in different communities of the department of Antioquia. PPP's are made up of weather resistant metallic structures, each one with a collection of 300 books, billboards, benches and all the necessary implements for a book lending service. They offer the residents of a neighborhood the possibility of a free and casual access to books and reading.

There are street roaming reading programs, such as Itinerant Readings, Neighborhood Readings or the Bibliocorner. Street programs are sometimes created to facilitate reading materials to sectors of the city with no libraries; on other occasions, they attempt to mitigate the problem stemming from juvenile bands and conflicts generated among the inhabitants of different neighborhoods when someone trespasses the boundaries and limits of their territory. The program consists in a collection of books and other reading

materials, interesting for children and young people. In a canvas bag that can take the form of a book exhibitor, weekly, at the same hour, a collection is brought to a fixed place, which is generally a store or a small neighborhood business. There it remains for a determined period of time, loans are made, audio readings take place and suggestions are received that are then attended in future visits. Periodic presence and the continuity of this activity create expectation among the people. Above all, it has become an invitation to visit the public libraries.

Other activities that attempt to broaden the circuits of book circulation in places other than the library are the Book Parks (“Biblioparques”) and Reading Festivals, sometimes associated to festivities and community celebrations. All these activities, basically made up of actions in which, under tents or awnings, books and silent or audio readings go outdoors, onto the street, are activities in which librarians and reading materials look for the reader on previously determined dates.

One of the activities most recently undertaken was work with children from 0 to 6 years of age, through a government program called Community Children’s Homes. Each home is coordinated by a mother, referred to as a community mother. They are women that take care of a group of 25 to 30 neighborhood children while the children’s mothers are at work; they are generally women with a very low educational level. For these homes, almost always located in marginalized areas, haversacks or bags are prepared containing 35 books each (at least one per child); the mothers receive basic training and preparation so that they can work with the children and their reading, and they get a primer with advice and practical orientations.

The search for readers has led the Culture and Library Department to participate in the Medellin Book Fair with a library project. Under a great white tent, the Book Circus (“*Bibliocirco*”) is set up, a place fostering a non-commercial relationship with books, from the point of view of a festivity in which children, young people and adults come in pleasant and uncompromising contact with reading, by means of workshops, encounters with authors, oral readings, story hours, and even a story museum, in which representative objects of classic children tales are exhibited. The power of attraction exerted by the fair and the scale of the project has made it possible to explore mass activities, to experiment with and develop an alternative working model that has then been used in other projects.

Recently, jointly with the Comfenalco hotels and tourist centers, a program called the **Literary Menu** was undertaken. In each hotel room, guests find a printed menu with books recommended for reading during their stay. Books contained in the menu are directed to the different members of the family group, with emphasis on children and young people, and they can be requested at the hotel reception, just like television remote controls or room keys. As happens with these elements, the books are discharged from the guest's bill upon being returned. Books in the menu are grouped according to reading experience levels or to hotel recreational activities. For example, for children there are Stories to be read with the very small, Traditional stories to be read in a low voice, Stories with little text, Riddles, rhymes and tongue twisters for playing. For young people, Books to explore science and technology; Novels for independent adolescents, Books for family laughter, Books to build things, etc. For mature members of the family there are also different options: Books to keep your body in form, Novels that can be read in a short time, Poems to invoke love, Short stories while sun bathing, among others.

During an entire month at the beginning of the school year, the second-hand book exchange season takes place, which becomes a place of exchange in which youngsters can bring used books and exchange them. Though its basic intention is exchanging school textbooks, exchanges of all types of books are also allowed. This is a highly popular program, mainly among people belonging to the more underprivileged social sectors, who see in it the opportunity to reduce costs of educational materials.

As previously stated, at Comfenalco work takes place in the different social security areas. Therefore, there are, among our co-workers, lawyers, doctors, social workers, psychologists, journalists, cleaning personnel, drivers, etc. that work in the different branches and parts of the city. Many of them recognize the value of reading and have repeatedly expressed their lack of time to attend and enjoy with their children the programs offered by the library. In order to get reading materials to these families (at present they are 280 in total) the Book Mail Program was designed. The employee can inscribe his children between 0 and 14 in the program. Every month, books for the children and youngsters are sent from the libraries to the office or place of work of their father or mother. The library keeps a “log” of each of these readers, in which age, reading experience, books read, preferences and degree of schooling achieved are consigned, in order to be sure that the books sent harmonize with their interests and expectations. Although this is a small scale experience, it is a way to get to the families and to interest parents in the reading formation of their children.

There is one action I do not want to omit mentioning. Because of its more traditional and more common character, it is often overlooked when speaking of increasing the possibilities of access to books: the home lending of books in libraries. To achieve this purpose all possible efforts are made, in order to motivate children to register in the libraries, either by themselves directly, or with the intermediation of their parents or of a responsible adult.

In the selection of materials acquired for children and young people we are especially careful. This has been a task of continuous learning for the team, in which we nurture ourselves from recommendations made by others. For this reason, we consult publications of the work of renowned selection groups in the Spanish language child and juvenile book environment, such as the Book Bank of Venezuela, Fundalectura in Colombia, the Germán Sánchez Ruiperez Foundation of Spain, etc., and we also make recommendations ourselves, by means of an informal monthly bulletin, *Alertacorreo* circulating internally throughout our library branches. Here the employees, regardless of the position they hold in the library, can write, make reviews and recommend what they have liked most or what has deserved their special attention. Thus, they motivate their fellow workers to read, they suggest their readings to others or they request their purchase for their library.

2. Activities for the formation of parents, teachers and youngsters, with the purpose of creating environments prone to reading.

That teachers have gratifying reading experiences motivating them to stimulate their pupils and to foster library projects in their educational establishments is one of the purposes pursued by Comfenalco libraries.

With this aim, a Teachers' Formation Program of four twelve-hour levels has been structured. They are about the conceptualization of reading, its promotion and support; the criteria for the selection of child and juvenile books; the different encouragement and promotion activities that can be implemented, and the elaboration of institutional reading promotion projects. These courses are directed to all the educators of a given institution. The methodology employed includes oral readings, team projects, workshops, display of materials, exhibitions, video and slide projections, and take-home book lending, among other activities.

The teachers who have attended the program keep all the course manuals, in addition to book collections to be rotated among them during the year.

Schools within the scope of the libraries receive the support of library services, not only through collections and teacher formation programs, but also through special advisory, to help them organize,

consolidate or develop their own school libraries. Reading promotion committees for teachers have also been created, with the help of representatives from the educational establishments, in order to bring them up to date on library programs and to give renewed vigor to the collections lent to schools through the traveling box service.

In order to stimulate educators and librarians regarding their reading promotion programs, an event called **Reading Promotion Actions: Other voices** has been created for them, in which teachers have the opportunity to tell the community what they are doing to foment reading habits in their institutions.

Besides, directed to parents and adults interested in the reading formation of tiny tots, monthly lecture sessions are offered, under the name **The Readers' Home Formation Workshop**, in which a both theoretical and practical approach is given to some matters related with the formation of readers. It covers such topics as illustrated books, nursery rhymes, informative books, stories and novels for children, among others.

Additionally, directed to adults, leaflets and fold-outs have been designed, such as the series **Reading, quite an adventure**, in which recommendations and advice are given for the initiation of the smallest to reading and for the practice of oral and silent reading.

Our activities are not limited to teachers and parents; the formation of youngsters is something that has deserved all our effort. There is a series of **Juvenile Seminars for the Development of Reading**, in different libraries and places of the city, aimed at motivating young people who have showed interest in the development of reading and who regularly visit the library. Thus, a more formal approach to books and reading becomes possible and their creativity and talent are encouraged.

In 1998, in some library branches, weekly literary creation workshops for young people were created. They have been given different names: **Letrería (letter library)**, **Aquileo**, **Poet's Eyes**, **Quarry** and **Hall of Water**. The workshops, which are directed by a well known poet, have turned out a group of youngsters with abilities and habits proper of the craft of written creation, such as analyzing and commenting texts, exchanging ideas, discussing authors and readings, writing diaries, letters, stories, and poems, and revising, editing and rereading their own texts, among others. As a fruit of this permanent exercise, several anthologies have been published, which include the best of the young people's writings.

3. Activities aimed at encouraging the approach of children and youngsters to books and reading by means of actions that stimulate reading and cultural information

In this chapter I want to highlight those activities that try to create a bond between a specific reading material and an individual or group. One of them is the traditional **story hour** that is held daily for children voluntarily visiting the library. It is also offered for groups of school children accompanied by their teachers.

Oral reading programs for children and young people, though being essentially similar, have different names, depending on the public to which they are directed, and on the place and circumstances in which they are carried out: **Words to share**, for small children accompanied by their parents, **Literary Ebb-tide**, for young people and adults; **Readings at the Leo XIII Clinic**, for hospitalized children; **Waiting for the Doctor**, for children and mothers waiting for medical attention. Oral reading programs have suffered changes throughout time. At the beginning, strategies such as finishing off a reading activity with another seemingly more attractive one like painting, modeling, or origami were adopted; now, as the years have gone by, we consider that in order to achieve our purpose of forming readers, the focus and the goal

of all activities should be reading itself. Other activities can be carried out in other scenarios and at other moments..

In the libraries we also have readers' clubs, both for children as for young people that get together to do audio reading, to speak about books, to invite writers and to make visits to places agreed on by all.

An activity that the inhabitants of Medellin look forward to every year is the International Poetry Festival, which has been organized in the city for the last ten years by the Prometheus Corporation. Comfenalco Libraries have always been one of the headquarters of this important festival that congregates thousands and thousands of persons, mainly young ones, around poets coming from all over the world to read their productions. As a complement to this festival previous courses and workshops take place, with national and foreign poets. The members of our libraries' poetry workshops have the opportunity to share their productions and make them known among other young people and poets of renown.

Since 1995 the production of a series of exhibitions was undertaken, which I like to call *mural books*, although they do not have book form. These exhibitions are displayed in the Comfenalco libraries and then circulate gratuitously in schools, universities, culture houses and other libraries of the city, and are let out to companies and commercial centers.

Among them deserving special mention are those exhibitions that are related with the world of child and juvenile literature, such as:

- **Beings of a Marvelous Literature**, that makes us travel through the world of gnomes, fairies, ogres, witches, elves, hobbits, etc.
- **Child and Juvenile Literature Illustrators**, in which 20 illustrators of children's books are signaled out, who are acknowledged worldwide;
- **Heroes of the Age of Adventure**, which includes those beloved characters like Pinocchio, Alice, Heidi, Michel Strogoff, etc.
- **Authors of Latin American Children's Literature**, which comprises 20 authors from our continent.

During the present year an exhibition on science fiction literature is being prepared.

The scripts for these exhibitions are prepared by the group of library reading promoters and their graphic and industrial design is the work of design students of a university: divided into groups, they work on this project during the semester, in order to submit it at the end to the verdict of the jury, made up of their professors and Comfenalco librarians. The winning group receives monetary recognition plus the additional reward of seeing its idea materialized.

Showing respect and appraisal for the likes of young people as a starting point in attracting them to the library, for the past five years weekly rock video concert cycles have been held. Their objective is not only to serve as an approach to this musical genre and its appreciation, but also to shorten distances between the young and books. Thus, this program has forced the acquisition of bibliographical materials that account for, give support to and inform on the history of rock, its main characters and its socio-cultural environment. For a public library it is important to demystify topics that are supposedly "countercultural"; in other words, to be open to the incorporation of this type of expressions that let us build a culture that, though being ours, has a universal bent.

In turn, this experience has propitiated the conception and design of a graphic and mural exhibition called *The Instants of Rock*, in which the history and influences of rock are summed up, from the 50's to our days, as one of the most relevant cultural manifestations of the human being during the XXth century.

In all the libraries there are weekly programs for children and young people with the best in world cinema. Among them I single out *Children in the Cinema*, *Stars and Stars*, *The Camera Lucida* and *The Blue Cinema*. This year a cinema project has been undertaken with a group of children belonging to one of the most violent areas in the city. In view of the fact that it is not possible to find, within their own neighborhood, either a place or conditions of security that would make it possible to carry out the program, which deals with *The Grammar of the Cinema*, every week its participants are taken by bus to another branch, where they receive the program. These programs are directed by young cinema fans and experts.

4. The mass media

Many are the protagonists that must intervene in the formation of readers. It is not a problem belonging exclusively to the school or to the library. It is a sum of multiple efforts, in which schools, libraries, families, adults, government, and the media, among others partake.

Public libraries have an ever more frequent recourse to the media in order to achieve different purposes, among which are their own public positioning, information on events, making messages known and increasing covering. For the past ten years, the Library and Culture Department, aware of the power and impact exercised by the media, and of the large audience they can reach, has permanently collaborated in the children's magazine of El Colombiano, the most important newspaper in Medellin and the second in the country. Every two weeks Comfenalco employs this medium to guide the community in the vast world of child literature. Although the page is designed for children, it has gradually become a selection tool for parents and teachers on literature for those early stages.

Together with other institutions Comfenalco participates in the preparation of PROLECTURA's magazine Fifty Books Unlimited, the net of institutions that promote reading in the country. Thus, parents and teachers receive guidelines for the choice of children's books. Much emphasis has been put on all these actions, since we are aware of the paradox surrounding librarians, who —though living in the midst of books—, have but a scarce participation in the world scenario of literary criticism.

Although books have been the main support in reading promotion, other means have been used, such as competitions, posters, postcards, calendars, visors, T-shirts, bags and caps, to disclose messages that promote the act of reading. The different Comfenalco library branches are decorated with more than 200 posters from different countries of the world, with messages allusive to reading.

As a conclusion I want to insist on two of the main success conditions in the formation of readers: the periodic and permanent character of activities, and the people who coordinate them or carry them out.

I always like to compare reading promotion actions with nutrition campaigns. It is not enough to distribute glasses of milk just one time among a group of children suffering from malnutrition. If you really want achievement and getting good long range results, these actions must be continuous and deliberate. Continuity and permanency are the culminating point of any effective action in the creation of reading habits. Occasional activities, such as fairs, sporadic visits of a "bibliobus" to a school, to a village or a marginalized neighborhood, can awaken interest and improve public opinion, but they can also generate a feeling of frustration, should they lack continuity.

Professionals in charge, not only of the realization and design of the activities, but also of the selection and purchase of books, should be prepared and motivated and find delight in what they do. They must be well acquainted with the environment. Administratively, in Comfenalco libraries all activities aimed at putting the different audiences in contact with reading materials belong to a coordination office called the Reading Development Coordination. Often enough, even librarians ask us why an area dedicated to reading was created within the library. Its conformation was intentional: we were aware that our task as librarians, more than just attending users, had to do rather with the formation of readers. We wanted to be more strategic, to develop services, to unify approaches, to get to other publics far from the benefits of urban areas and, above all, to have place for reflection and analysis. An interdisciplinary team was formed, with the participation of professionals in education, Spanish and literature, pre-school education, languages and library science, who are in charge of decentralized activities and of those that take place in each of the branch libraries.

A final statement: the public library should not waste any opportunity to promote reading and to generate ties and relationships between people and reading materials. Therefore, all the efforts made in designing innovative programs, in getting to new groups, in qualifying personnel, in generating reflection on its actions, in handing out information and making its programs known, will facilitate and prepare the environment, so that for an ever increasing number of children and youngsters reading can naturally become one of their many daily activities.