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Books to build

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Abstract:

The following paper presents two Banco del Libro's projects. The first one, Leer para vivir (Read to Live), was an initiative in answer to the tragic flooding in all of the Vargas State in 1999. The second one, Tendiendo puentes con la lectura (Building Bridges with Books) has been carried out since 2002 as a response to the extremely difficult political and social climate in Venezuela. Both have been concerned with reading promotion in public spaces and the different actors of civil society: children, adolescents, volunteers, teachers, and librarians. The paper reflects on how encounters with quality literature allow the reader to cope with tragedy, social crisis, and conflict, as well as to obtain tools to face everyday issues with a greater citizenship consciousness.

Key words:

Reading, book selection, bibliotherapy, citizenship, communication.

We believe that, as never before, conditions are appropriate for social change, and that education will be its main tool. An education that goes from the crib to the tomb, nonconformist

and reflective, to inspire us with new ways of thinking and encourage us to discover who we are in a society that appreciates itself more. That makes the most of our inexhaustible creativity and conceives an ethics – maybe an aesthetics – for our unbridled and legitimate thirst

*for personal growth.
Gabriel García Márquez*

Books to heal, books to build

If not taken in its instrumental sense, the act of reading does not appear in any statistical studies, it does not enter in the World Health Organization's priority areas. Maybe reading is considered as an extreme luxury when compared with violence. And this only shows us one thing: we don't understand the vital and therapeutic aspects.

Of course, reading, in this case, isn't simply the skill acquired at a given school level. Reading that opens spaces for communication and development goes much further than the action of deciphering the alphabet. Nevertheless, we sustain that the initiation to this type of reading is achieved by being in contact with books of great quality; those which through aesthetic aspects - related to the ethic aspects - allow us to find ourselves in the stories of others, and to find ourselves amidst plurality. Books are, as Larrosa tells us in that essential publication *La experiencia de la lectura (The Experience of Reading)*, "optical instruments that writers offer us in order to make reading a way to help us shape how we see ourselves and, beginning from ourselves, how we see the world" (1996). But in order to understand reading in its wider aspect we need to be readers, especially those of us who make working with books our trade. Only this way can reading go beyond its simple instrumental aspect and create meaningful bonds with language, with the critical understanding of the world that surrounds us, and with our own self-expression.

Nevertheless, at the Banco del Libro we have arrived to these ideas through experience. The road has been the other way around, an intuitive route from the actions leading to revealing research carried out by specialists of different areas of knowledge.

A project: Leer para vivir (Read to Live)

This project began as a response to the horrifying tragedy occurred in 1999, when the State of Vargas was literally destroyed, and with it the whole country. Bewildered by the brutal devastation, we decided to go and read stories to the victims of the flood. Heartbreaking experiences then took place, like when mothers confessed that their children were able to sleep better after they were told stories; or that when they returned to their destroyed neighborhoods, and still between rocks and dust they decided to clean the streets and close them in different points in order to read between; or when afterwards, parents and teachers began to form themselves as storytellers and lent books to the community 24 hours a day. After some months had gone by, we suspected that we were giving something more than mere entertainment or a way to escape from reality. According to specialists we were engaged in a therapeutic practice, something that some people nowadays call bibliotherapy which can be defined, in its more humanistic than clinical sense, as *the possibility to establish a human and sensible relationship with books*, to favor changes in the victims' lives and to help rebuild realities. (Banco del Libro 2000a).

Banco del Libro then gave its support, in an energetic initiative headed by Carmen Martínez, to a project, *Leer para Vivir* that would carry out simultaneously three main lines of action:

- With children: *La hora del cuento (Storytelling hour)*, with the participation of volunteers from Banco del Libro and Ekaré Publishing House.
- With the community's adults: by reading novels to them a chapter at a time, creating a loan system, and giving them workshops to enable them to form their own reading corners, select quality books and read out loud.
- With preschool teachers through encounters, workshops, and symposiums to establish a diagnostic of their needs, recognize the importance of bibliotherapy in their realities, and carry out reading promotion projects in their communities.

These activities produced rich moments of sharing and learning. We selected and donated book collections for different areas of Vargas. At first we began lending only a few books, and only if the children asked for them. The reason for this is that we discovered that when a program begins by donating books, without implementing reading initiation strategies, it won't succeed as well as one that begins with the simple act of putting readers and good books in contact with each other. Books begin by being only shy visitors which only stay when their readers ask them to. That's when they seem to whisper something in each person's privacy.

We began with only one sure premise for each project: the careful selection and evaluation of the materials to be used. We believe what Joseph Gold says in his book *Read for your Life*, that only good books have "the power to alter the reader's way of thinking and perceiving. Fiction can help to reorganize thinking, resolve problems, remember the past when you need to review it and see it differently. In other words, fiction can be a powerful agent for creative and healthy change...Fiction helps you to re-story yourself." (1990). And as Carmen Diana Dearden, president of Banco del Libro, says, *literature, in other words, helps us rewrite our own stories.* (Banco del Libro 2000b).

After four years, *Leer para vivir* is no longer a project of Banco del Libro, but of the Vargas State's people. The community itself, through simple and continuous strategies has created reading clubs, workshops for teachers and parents, and storytelling is already a common ritual that is carried out along the whole state. Nowadays we can say that children and adults have allowed books and literature to enter into their homes. We have found the presence of these very generous guests in the most unconceivable places. And more than five thousand copies travel from Caruao to Carayaca, covering the whole state.

From this experience in Vargas State we came to three important conclusions:

- That every project that is based upon a careful selection that includes variety and aesthetic quality, can open possibilities for individual elaboration through enjoyable encounters.
- That any project we undertake should consider the strengthening of nets in order to return leadership back to those spaces, home- school – library, that they were intended for; and in third place, that the projects should be carried out in defined cycles, work without assumptions, but in a continuous way and with systematic follow-ups, it should be more open to the others' needs than to the rigid planning of goals.

Nevertheless, we understand that books, as Larrosa says, "should stimulate spiritual life but not constitute it, should give you things to think about but not transmit that which has already been thought, should be a starting point but never an ending point" (1996). And we are conscious of the continuing deprivations, and after almost five years depression is very present, and with it the

need to re-elaborate memory. We need to, as in any place where tragedy manifests itself in such an overwhelming manner, understand that our efforts are only that: little big feats that should not be abandoned, and to ask ourselves about what we can continue doing with creativity, affection and discipline in favor of reconstruction.

Another project: Tendiendo puentes con la lectura (Building Bridges with Books)

The bibliotherapy experience carried out in Vargas has given us valuable keystones. Katherine Paterson, Hans Christian Andersen Award winner, essential author to the project, generous contributor and sponsor of *Leer para vivir*, offers us the following words:

Over my long years of life, I've seen so many crevices that need bridges – crevices in culture and in time, racial, religious, class and political divisions – that it seems that these bridges could be built for children, if only I could build a good enough one. But the lesson I have learned, over these long years, is that one cannot only build one bridge for one child, it's necessary to convert ourselves into bridges; it's necessary to lay ourselves over the abyss.

Through this attempt to favor encounters which aim towards reflection and transformation, we have taken a step further: *citizenship*, from individual elaboration to social inclusion. Nowadays Venezuela is going through a situation of extreme political conflict, where everyday routine is threatened and, what's worse, we have become used to live amidst a tense climate of violence and distrust. A country of crevices, of marked differences and social breaches – a time bomb – where the urgent multiplication of strategies that favor inclusion on all levels becomes imperative. In this context, words such as liberty, citizenship, diversity, tolerance, and civil society, are reorganized once and again by media professionals that participate in the public sphere. But while the meaning of these words seems to stagnate in a reductionist and manichaeian manner, reality persists, and its analysts take distance from it. It is extremely necessary to work towards an integral democracy that goes beyond a simple political system that is validated every five years by means of the vote. As Rubén Sánchez David says “democracy, apart from being a politic regime based on liberty, justice and equality, is also a way of life, a form of culture that manifests itself in a system of beliefs, values and habits of coexistence.” (w/d)

What can we do in order to ensure the chain of meanings?, How can we give body and trueness to these key words?

At Banco del Libro we don't attempt to have the answers to so many and so difficult questions. From our experience, we have dared to articulate proposals that are based on reflections from our own space: reading promotion and literature for children and youth.

And, in this sense we consider that the project ***Building Bridges with Books*** has been able, over two years, to create a space of reflection about these themes related to the democratic exercise. On one hand, the experience we have had in the many encounters with professionals, specialists, community workers, children and young people, deserves to be told, to be known.

First phase: encounters with specialists

The first planning started at the beginning of 2003, and consisted of a series of thematically articulated meetings directed to adults. There, at the institution's headquarters, we held conversations that reflected upon democracy and citizenship from legal, social, political and

educational points of view. We –community leaders, teachers, librarians –attempted to reach a deep and critical view of the country through the orientation of specialists in different areas. After months of meaningful encounters with historians, sociologists, political scientists, we had the necessary tools to make a diagnosis: in spite of the deep crisis, in spite of the historical or psychological reasons, we constitute a plural country where initiatives that work towards a culture of social inclusion emerge day by day.

Therefore, *Building Bridges* is a project that proposes different lines of work: *with specialists, with children and with the community* that intends to open spaces for the reflection of those themes directly related to the exercise of citizenship, insisting at every moment on national culture of integration based on the articulation and strengthening of social networks. This project, in its second phase, promptly received the support of the DAI (Development Alternatives Inc) because it shared its areas of work, whose fundamental objectives are the strengthening of democratic processes and the promotion of understanding and reconciliation.

This is how, since 2003 we began the program called *Cuentos entre amigos (Stories with friends)* that has consisted of weekly encounters between children, books and storytellers, during six months in Guarataro, Catia and Petare, popular areas of the capital city.

With the children and the community

Based on Katherine Paterson's image, that one should turn oneself into a bridge for the children, we have learned that they can also be bridges to enable us, the adults, to consolidate bonds, and it is also through the children that we can read and confront the crisis in an unusual creative manner.

Stories with friends is a proposal that has been developed in three popular areas of Caracas, based on continuous work with civil associations that already had footholds in the community: with the Complementary Education Project in Guarataro, Alternative Education Community Teachers in Petare, and the Salmerón Acosta Preschool in Catia.

The activities have consisted mainly of simple encounters with groups of approximately forty children of different ages, in non-conventional spaces and having thematic selection of quality books as its basis. The work hasn't been carried out neither from a moral point of view nor from a rational one, rather it has been based on an unassuming and affective dialogue. This is because the images given to us by culture, and therefore by literature, allow, as Serge Boimare says "complex issues, primary anxieties, to be contained, in a figurative and symbolic register, in a metaphor that gives us center and mollifies us."(w/d)

This way, through the authors and their characters, through metaphors and polyphony, we have been working with themes that weave the real concept of citizenship. But it isn't easy –perhaps unrealizable?- to explore the complex field of identity. In what ways can we tackle difference, coexistence, tolerance, liberty and solidarity amidst a climate of negation, repression, violence and fear?

Methodology

Each work session begins with a central reading, and then a group of books that have been

thematically selected are read (about up to ten different titles per session). The journey and the identity themes, for example, are worked with adventure and autobiographical genres, always inviting children to express themselves through drawings and other plastic activities and narrations.

In many sessions we have worked on a variety of themes concerning their own reality, like the house, for example, where the children describe the house they live in and then imagine their own future house, its construction and possibilities. In other sessions we have gone out to explore other worlds through adventure stories, but to work the voyage topic with children that aren't even able to leave their neighborhoods in order to know their own city, hasn't been easy. Nevertheless, enriching strategies have come up. Like in a session in which we decided to work first with the topic of the fantastic journey, and, later on, maybe the following week, we would work the real journey, the journey around the country, through Venezuelan stories, to imagine ourselves traveling through that city in which we live in and that is so alien to us. Suddenly we started to wonder about those friends that were reading the same stories, at the same time, on the other side, in another neighborhood. After three weeks, we worked the communication topic, the bridge, through letters and cards that the children wrote or drew to their friends who lived in that other urban corner. The common theme? The characters of the books they were simultaneously reading.

Thus, in an indirect, affective, daily, and patiently continuous manner, during months, every week at the same time, we would meet among stories of other places. Little by little, and, among drawings, diaries, letters and conversations they have been imagining a wider and more diverse world, further away than their own, and they recreate themselves in it. On July, Banco del Libro, the house where the books come from, invited them to meet with those friends from other places, to meet with the storytellers and their characters. Now we know that, as Larrosa says, what it's finally all about is to "make of reading an activity that helps us shape our own view of ourselves, and from ourselves, of our world." (1996)

Aspects to be emphasized

Despite the substantial differences of each popular area in Caracas, they are united by some things in common, and now we can confirm that:

- Recreational public spaces like squares and parks are dilapidated, occupied or nonexistent.
- Time for leisure activities has been displaced, in some cases because the children form part of the family wage-winners.
- Family care is scarce; this is evidenced in the children's physical aspect and nutritional deficiency. The alternative education centers end up providing the integration, protection and attention they don't find at home.
- Many teenagers, between the ages of 11 and 16, participate in the recreational activities; the age group that presents major school desertion.

- There are continuous expressions of violence that are learned by what they daily see in their community.
- There is resistance to establish social networks, it seems that among the different community initiatives there is a lot of distrustfulness and power struggles.
- The public institutions that work with communities, like libraries, schools or squares, can become bureaucratic and prevent the citizen's free performance.
- A permanent presence of political activities and governmental projects tend to multiply themselves in common spaces.

Nevertheless, with the initiative of *Stories with friends*, we can confirm that:

- Children already know the books, the characters and their readers.
- The initial violent expressions have been replaced by games, without authoritarian or repression forms, because the pleasure of active participation in the different dynamics seems to have made them more aware of their coexistence.
- Language broadens itself through the stories of others.
- Reading, followed by plastic or oral activities, have favored the children's individual expression.
- Books are bridges that help us recognize a fulfilled interior world, even amidst great violence.
- The space is reorganized in order to meet the storytellers, and gradually the communities have created their own reading corners.
- We affirm that there is time and space to read for pleasure. These voracious readers rediscover even old books and textbooks that were left behind on the shelves.

And, where are we going now?

At the end of the first phase of *Stories with friends*, after six months, in December, book collections were donated to the communities. Few books for Catia because the teachers' and other participants' response wasn't as meaningful as in the other two places. In Guarataro we didn't conform ourselves with only donating books as a closure. There, the teenagers offered themselves to assist us and help us with the little ones, we held meetings with publishing professionals so that the youngsters could understand all the aspects related to the making of books, and explore vocations and fields of work. We held very interesting meetings with publishers, illustrators and authors where the children and teenagers were able to even imagine themselves working in those areas. A reading corner was constituted, and we carried out a workshop for the teenagers, who later on designed a loaning system, and nowadays a modest collection of books circulates around the barrio. After six months, the alternative education center's leaders had the initiative to present their own cultural promotion project related to the

barrio's memory. Banco de Libro has given them the necessary expert advice and is ready to offer them workshops on self-management.

We have kept on going to Petare, and have been doing so since a year ago, every Friday at two thirty with new volunteers and incorporating new titles. Nowadays, there, *Stories with friends* has focused only on the identity theme, to enable each child to articulate the expression of him/herself through different ways: conversations, drawings and writing. But it hasn't been easy, there is still fear, insecurity, resistance, the white space on a paper frightens them and they seem to feel evaluated.

The upcoming September, and with this testimonial voyage, we reach our first anniversary of adventures, *building bridges through stories with friends*, and we are full of reflections and anecdotes, that have finally allowed us a kaleidoscopic approach to these realities of ours, so taken by tragedies, so chaotic, but so full of promises of transformation. We view the third phase of this project as being carried out on many lines of work: to rescue the public spaces that we have already explored, and to work in the training of community leaders. But most important are those little friends that have been growing with us from the beginning, and with them so their needs. Demands that cannot wait. Where they live, every night they violently stop being children.

We have understood that our aspirations are gigantic: How can we promote tolerance and diversity to youngsters that don't even have a space to express themselves? How can we ask them to communicate when in their homes they are told to be silent? How can we tell them about coexistence when they don't even have a space of their own? And, how can we talk about identity when they don't even have a legal ID? There, in a corner of one of the continent's biggest barrios, with friends who are not inserted in regular education programs, sons and daughters of illegal immigrants, we have the enthusiasm to keep on going. The thing is that this enterprising group of volunteers recognize, like Katherine Paterson, that in spite of all those crevices between culture, time lines, races and political ideologies, we have to keep on trying, we have to keep on reading in order to live, and we have to keep on building bridges.

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