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Fostering Literacy Development through the Use of Big

Books in a Group of First Graders at a Public Institution

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Fostering Literacy Development through the Use of Big Books in a Group of First Graders at a Public Institution

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Abstract

This action research project was developed to explain in what ways the use of big books can promote literacy development in a group of first-graders at a public institution in Medellín. This project was carried out in a group of 41 students between boys and girls. In the action plan, a big book reading aloud strategy was implemented during the first semester of the academic year. Data were collected through an interview, student's artifacts, and a journal. Findings showed that the young students of this group responded in a very positive way to reading aloud and that the use of big books boosted their literacy process in combination with hands-on activities. Data also displayed environmental factors of the institution that significantly affected their levels of attention and their learning process.

Keywords: The book experience, Activities response, Class management, School constraints.

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Degree Requirement

This is an action research project submitted as a requirement for the Bachelor of Education in Foreign Languages Teaching (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellín-Colombia.

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Preface

This action research project was born as a requirement to obtain my bachelor's degree in foreign languages . Through this, I could put into practice many valuable didactic and pedagogical elements learned during my time in the Language School. I also had the opportunity to connect this project with my greatest educational commitment and that is childhood education. During that time, I observed the way children begin their literacy process is still very traditional. This is the reason why I wanted to develop a project that was more connected to the enjoyment that big books and stories can provide kids in their literacy process, along with their first steps with English language learning. By exercising this holistic approach to literacy, it was possible to take full advantage of the student's fantasy and imagination so engrained in their early childhood development.

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1   Context Description

The educational institution I. E El Playón is an official public institution located in the neighborhood "El Playón de Los Comuneros" in the city of Medellín. El Playón de Los Comuneros neighborhood is part of commune 2, which was initially populated by displaced people from other municipalities. It is mostly populated by the working-class families belonging to strata 1 and 2, and it is home to a large number of Venezuelan immigrants. In general, it is a context with serious problems of violence, and drug addiction, among others. It is a neighborhood with a great commercial movement and several educational institutions. Nearby the institution there are some sports spaces of the INDER, a public gymnastic park, the María Auxiliadora church, and a CAI from the National Police.

2   Physical Description

The institution offers pre-school, elementary, secondary, media, and technical middle school with morning and afternoon schedules. The technical modalities offered by the institution are in tourism and the organization of events; these programs are supported by the Colegio Mayor. The school has three floors and eleven classrooms, all of which are spacious and ventilated. The bathrooms are located on two floors, there is room for physical education implements, a room for the radio station, the media tech room that is used for meetings and conferences, the teachers' lounge, the rectory, and the secretariat office. In addition, there is the UAI office to support students with special educational needs. It also has a large playground and a library in which activities are constantly developed for students. It has a wide variety of books and academic documents, but it does not have materials in English for children.

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3   School Philosophy

Educational institution El Playón has a mission, to promote in its student's values such as respect, creativity, and coexistence to transform social realities. The institution's vision for the year 2025 is to be recognized for contributing to the social transformation of its community, improving school coexistence in addition to strengthening skills that facilitate student's performance in the productive sector.

The philosophy of the institution could be summarized in the following conceptions: Training of integral people through values such as respect, responsibility, and creativity. Through the improvement of school coexistence, the aim is to improve the family and social context of the students.

4   Class Methodology

Regarding the teaching of English at the institution, it does not count with many resources specifically focused to teach English; They do not follow a specific textbook or any kind of guide material, they only have English dictionaries for the students. The English syllabus is based on the PEI (Proyecto Educativo Institucional) which is the standards of competences in foreign languages proposed by the Ministry of National Education. The school does not apply an explicit English language teaching approach or methodology. In preschool there is not a specific teaching program in English, therefore, preschool children do have not had any approach to the English language.

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4.1   The Classroom

The preschool room is located on the first floor of the institution in front of the playground. It is a large and airy classroom, with a large window that is on the right side of the room. It has a wide board for markers and a television with internet access. Several posters with numbers and letters are pasted along the walls of the classroom. There is a part of the back wall that contains the rules in the classroom, and a poster with the student of the week, where the most important characteristics of each student are highlighted. There are also two drawers with a variety of materials and didactic games. There is not a single space in the classroom that does not have some content or poster. Regarding the desks and chairs, these seem to be enough for each of the students. There is a desk for the teacher and an extra desk for practitioners or observers. They are in good condition.

4.2   The Students

Concerning the Preschool group, there are 30 students, between 5 and 6 years of age. Most of them are Venezuelans and have had difficulties adjusting to the school system. In general, it is a diverse group, there are two children with different diagnoses, one of them has some characteristics of the autism spectrum, and the other one with attention deficit. Most of the children are motivated, and with some moderate difficulty in following the rules, but in general, they are receptive to learning and have already started literacy and math processes. Their main interest is the games where they can have a lot of movement.

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4.3 My Cooperating Teacher

My (CT) started this year at the institution. She has 10 years of experience as a teacher in the official public sector. She has a degree in preschool education from the University of Monserrate in Bogotá. She has recently finished a master's degree at El tecnológico de Antioquia, called: "Master's degree with an emphasis on childhood". This master's degree changed her perception of teaching, seeing it as a set of processes and not achievements in itself.

5 Statement of the Problem

Based on the observations conducted in the first-grade group, I identified different situations that influenced the teaching and learning process. I will emphasize, presenting two main relevant aspects. The first one refers to the literacy method with which children are learning and the latter aspect refers to the lack of enjoyment of children during the learning literacy process.

According to my observations, children of this group are beginning the literacy process through alphabetic and syllabic methods." … In one of the classes for example they began to study the letter M: They did it through different activities of transcription of texts on the board, cutting them out and pasting letters and words on their notebooks, and watching videos:

"Children are currently doing a sentence transcription activity with the letter M:

"Mi mamá me mima "(Journal excerpt, Sept 2nd, 2021, personal communication).

Once everyone finished, the teacher went on to the next activity: It is an exercise in organizing words, the children received some strips of paper to organize and paste into their notebook in the correct order, following a phrase written on the board: "Mi mamá me ama"

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The class ends with a video about the letter "M" from the YouTube channel: "El monosílabo" (Journal excerpt, Sept 2nd, 2021, personal communication)

Although children can learn through an explicit instruction of literacy, I consider from my point of view as a teacher that an approach to literacy in the mother language and English as a second language could be away from these syllabic methods that teach isolated skills. It is important to provide children with a meaningful context of what they are learning, becoming a holistic and enjoyable experience. Since "initial literacy cannot be treated as learning a code".

According to Barbara Park (1982):

Many teachers feel insecure if they do not teach reading skills in isolation and some predetermined order. This grows, I believe, out of their beliefs about the nature of the reading process and also a concern for accountability. This isolated skills approach leaves unanswered questions about the interrelationships of the various cue-in systems and the transferability of such skills instruction to the actual reading task. (p. 818)

Traditional literacy methods emphasize the transmission of fragments, in the reiteration and in the memorization of the name of the letters and their sounds, they show the elements in an isolated way. It is assumed that learning to read and to write is just adding the parts that the teacher was presenting at each moment. As a proposal to this issue, and according to my teaching principles, the inspiration given through my experience as a mother and the English for children subject studied at the last semester, I consider that it is possible to relate children's literature and literacy, basically, with the reading aloud, specifically using big books:

Gathered around a book as a natural, sharing community children learn more from actual participation than from direct instruction: they learn from the teacher's model, from their sensible involvement, and each other, without any sense of competition or pressure. They

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also learn from judicious instruction which is more intelligible because of its real and

obvious purposes. (Holdaway, 1990, p. 1)

The use of big books in the classroom could be a meaningful tool due to their special

features, mainly their size. According to Nambiar (1993), it is approximately 18 to 20 inches tall

and the print is at least an inch high, big enough to be seen by all the students in a group from

about 15 inches. The combination of predictable patterns of events and language structures

makes the story understandable for children even if they do not have complete control of the

language. The second aspect already mentioned has to do with the lack of enjoyment during

classes, especially during the literacy process. I do not see in the children a feeling of enjoyment

towards the process of literacy. I could notice it based on my observations and interactions with

the students. In October 2021, I registered in my journal: "Today the children are reviewing the

vowels and the letters M and P. through repetitions of the sounds. The children are asked to

transcribe the sentence: "Papá pela la piña.", then, they must draw a picture of it. The children

begin to do it but quickly lose interest, they want to get up from the chair, and cannot

concentrate. Due to the constant calls from the teacher, most of them end up in collaboration

with the teacher and other high school students who are in the classroom. Before going to break

lunch children try to finish, many of them have difficulties doing the transcription or do not

know very well what they are doing. The teacher goes to the board to explain again the sounds of

the letters: M y P" (Personal communication)

Considering the collected information through my observations and unstructured

interviews with the students and subsequent analysis of it, I strongly believe that the

implementation of big books in this matter is a valuable strategy that can make the introduction

to literacy in English a pleasant process for them, not only because of the large and colorful

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images that stimulate children innate fantasy but also because reading aloud emulate the family

reading experience that can be so pleasant and necessary for children in general:

> Enlarged texts allow all the children in the classroom to see and react to the words and
>
> pictures on the page as the teacher reads aloud, a vital similarity to the shared reading
>
> between parent and child. Many teachers believe that the Big Book approach is the
>
> closest approximation that can be offered in the classroom to the family storybook
>
> readings. (Nambiar, 1991, p. 3)

Considering that the age of my students is perfect to stimulate their imagination through

multiple stories, colors, images, and all the possibilities that a big book can offer, I expect that

through this action research I can cause a positive impact through reading, fantasy and a kind of

learning that are meaningful and enjoyable.

6   Theoretical Background

This action research aims to explain in what way big books can foster literacy

development in a group of first graders. The implementation of big books was chosen to bring

students closer to the literacy processes from a more holistic perspective, from the general to the

particular so that they can have the experience of constructing literacy in a non-fragmented way.

In the same way, presenting children's literature through reading aloud, favors the literacy

process and provides a pleasant experience for students. These ideas will be developed in light of

different authors who found through years of research and in the theory of Jean Piaget and

constructivism, important elements that connect the big books, children's literature, and the

process of literacy.

According to Nambiar (1991), big books are enlarged versions of conventional books. Its

approximate size can vary between 18 and 20 inches. Print and images are fully visible to

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children, and their predictable patterns in both plot and language facilitate children's

understanding and interaction. In that sense, children are able to take those patterns and create

their own stories. Regarding the aspect of repetition and predictability, Holdaway (1990)

considered the father of the big book stated:

> The choice of materials, especially those that we take the trouble to enlarge, influence the
>
> program deeply. Our priority must be to select from the open literature books that are
>
> worthy of repetition and have a high likelihood of becoming favorites. (p. 817)
>
> Also, he added:
>
> Prediction from pattern or structure often results in the easy recognition of whole
>
> language sequences (…Run, run, as fast as you can…") as well as providing essential
>
> cues in decoding individual words. This is the natural entry to teaching word recognition
>
> - and psycholinguistically the soundest way. Unlike word-by-word processing, it has the
>
> fluency of real language. (Holdaway, 1990, p. 818)

From these ideas exposed, children had, from their first beginnings in the literacy

processes, the opportunity to be readers and identify the parts of a story and to use these

structures and patterns to actively apply to their creations as authors and writers.

 Holdaway (1990) highlights the relevance not only of big books but also the importance

of reading aloud for children. He affirms that gathering around a book as emulating the

experience of family night reading brings a pleasant and motivating feeling to the child, at the

same time children can learn more from participation than from direct instruction. By reading a

book repeatedly, the child's need for repetition will be satisfied without pressure. And it is

through this same repetition that the patterns and structures of writing, reading, and language can

be internalized by children more holistically and less competitively

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In this regard, Ana Teberosky (2015) cited by Teberosky & Colomer (2001) shows us a clear relationship between the use of children's literature and the development of the literacy process with reading aloud by adults and stated that according to recent research, reading aloud to children develops vocabulary, understanding of the structure of gender, increases understanding of the characteristics of print: a) direction of reading, b) identification of letters, c) the function of the book, d) differences between illustration and text. In addition, Colomer As cited by Teberosky & Colomer (2001) affirms that "By relating the literature with the reading we incorporate the library in the classroom, and also in the Curriculum". For these reasons, I consider that approaching literacy from this perspective could develop independent readers and not code deciphers, which is typical of the inductive systems of the literacy process.

In connection with the above, we arrive at the crucial point about the literacy paradigm that sustains this action research. Authors such as Emilia Ferreiro, through her multiple investigations, demonstrate that literacy is not a learning of codes and hence her famous phrase:

"Reading is not deciphering; writing is not copying". In this sense, it is considered that children begin their literacy process long before entering school and that all their life experiences shape the processes that build literacy. The role of the teacher is then to provide the necessary elements for children to be active subjects in the literacy process.

Emilia Ferreiro (2000) cited by Álvarez & Hasbun (2014) states that:

Children think about writing, and their thought has an interest, coherence, validity, and extraordinary educational potential. You have to listen to them. You have to be able to listen to them from the first written babbling (simple squiggles, according to some, contemporary of the first drawings they make). We cannot reduce the child to a couple of eyes that see, a pair of ears that listen, a speech apparatus that emits sounds, and a hand

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that clumsily pressing a pencil on a sheet of paper. Behind (or beyond) the eyes, ears, speech apparatus, and hand is a subject who thinks and tries to incorporate into his own knowledge this wonderful means of representing and recreating the language that is writing, all scriptures. (p. 1)

As we could see, literacy processes can be presented to children from a more deductive perspective, we find in children's literature, in reading aloud, and in big books great valuable elements, to make this process something pleasant and magical. To conclude, and based on all these theoretical and investigative supports, I will present the research question and objectives in the next section.

7   Research Question

Consequently, with the research problem already stated in previous sections, I posed the following research question for my research project:

- How can the implementation of big books foster literacy development in a group of first-graders at a Public Institution?

7.1   General Objective

- To explain the way the implementation of big books fosters literacy development in a group of first graders.

7.2   Specific Objectives

- To identify the characteristics of big books that foster literacy development.
- To describe the literacy development fostered by the implementation of the big books.

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- To relate the influence of big books on literacy development in a group of first graders.

8   Action Plan

The action plan was designed to develop activities from February 2022 until the end of May. Considering the problem that I observed, the proposed strategy was reading aloud from big books combined with various activities to contextualize and accompany the reading. I chose four texts to read aloud, one for each month of the practicum and they were the following:

February: "The very Hungry Caterpillar"

April: "Good night Gorilla."

March: "From head to toe"

May: "The little red Hen".

The methodology of reading with children had a specific pattern.

Reading aloud: Before reading aloud to the children, a book introduction pattern would be followed. In this stage the children are introduced to the text, letting them make predictions about the content, it could be done through questions about the illustrations, the title of the book, and mostly, questions that "model" so they can connect the story with their context. In general, during this introduction, questions and activities are developed in order to pave the way for the reading of the book and make this as enjoyable as possible for children.

The reading is done in a slow but fluid way that allowed the participation of the children to predict and ask. After reading, activities are developed that encourage children to build connections with the contents.

At the end of each reading, we will have what is called the "Author's workshop".

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In this part, children carry out different painting and drawing activities to create their own books.

The idea with each selected text is that in the last week of the month they can tell the story of the book in their own words. We call this the "Reader's chair".

At the end of the semester, there will be an art gallery with all the children's creations, it will be called: "The speaking walls". This will be a time to close the meetings.

The action plan for the research will develop as follow:

The implementation of the activities and the observations will be recorded in my journal from February to May. For data collection, the observations will be made from the first to the last day of classes, an interview will also be conducted with my CT in the last stage of my practicum in the last week of May. Student artifacts will be collected at each class session from February to May.

9   Development of Actions

Returning to the educational institution after the end-of-year break. The children who were in preschool last year all go to first grade in another classroom with different characteristics and with another teacher. The physical changes in the children were notorious since many of them were already going through their teething change, the group this year was numerous. In the first session, I found out that there were many more children. Fifty children in total. In the first session, the objective was to meet again, and greet each other after so many weeks, as well as to get to know the new students. We made a greeting in English, and I saw the opportunity to present the first text, the big book: "The very Hungry Caterpillar". The strategy that I used for the presentation of the text begins with a puppet of the "caterpillar" of the story, who was their

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companion during all the sessions. This stuffed animal motivated them to engage in the following reading sessions.

Seeing the large number of students in such a small room, I began to think of a strategy that could facilitate one of the objectives of the project, which was to make these moments of reading a pleasant experience. The classroom conditions were not suitable for this purpose, too many students for a very small room. Then an idea arose to be able to carry out the activities with the big books. Then what I called "The word circle" was born.

The strategy was to split up the group. Half of the students would stay in the classroom developing a hands-on activity related to the text and the other half would go out with me to the playground, we would form a circle, in which we would talk and develop the reading aloud of the text and all the activities related to it. Then this first group would return to the classroom to carry out activities while I read with the second group in the "word circle". In this way, everyone could participate and enjoy the story. The cooperating teacher approved my strategy by remaining in the classroom helping and supporting half of the group that remained to do manual activities in their seats.

In this way the class structure comprised:

1. Greeting in the classroom and explanation of the day's agenda.

2. Dividing of the group. In this part, half of the children in the room that I chose made a small line, forming a "little train" led by the "caterpillar "puppet that would take us to the playground to make the circle and read the story.

3. The same process would be repeated with the other half of the group. In the second moment of the class.

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4. Once the entire group finished the activities, we would close the class and Caterpillar would say goodbye. Always sharing a chocolate bar and saying, "Thank you" and "See you next class" in English.

In the subsequent class session, it was carried out the aforementioned class structure. Caterpillar puppet presented the agenda and the materials to work on. In that session, it was presented how to introduce ourselves in English and how to say our favorite fruit in English. The group of children that remained in the classroom worked with tissue paper and glue to form a "Pear". While they stayed in the classroom under the supervision and support of the cooperating teacher, I went out with the other half of the group to read our story. We made our "train" that took us to the circle, once there we talked about the rules that we should follow when we were reading. That day I brought other large texts, and other stories so that they could manipulate them for about 15 minutes. Then, each student freely shared an idea about taking care of the books and we made some behavioral commitments. We build the rules of behavior. Then the introduction to the text was carried out, which consists of contextualizing the children with the text, which means scaffolding them by asking questions, and exploring the physical characteristics of the book, for example, the illustrations, and the title, allowing the children to participate by making predictions about the content of the book and the history. Through this introduction, it was sought that the children could relate their own experiences and previous knowledge to the content of the big book. Through the reading of the story, simple structures and food vocabulary were explored throughout all the sessions. At the end of each reading, the children had the opportunity to paint or color an element of the story.

It should be clarified that the reading is done in such a way that the children can participate, ask, and repeat the pronunciation of a word or some element of the story. During the

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reading, a pointer should be used to point out relevant words and thus they become familiar with the vocabulary of the story. Each class always has the same structure.

Unfortunately, the action plan was not carried out as planned for various reasons. Many of the scheduled sessions were suspended due to several institutional activities. Almost every week there was some activity or circumstance that did not allow the normal course of classes. Therefore, we finally worked on just one text out of the four I had planned. Through the reading of "The very hungry Caterpillar" multiple objectives were achieved in the same way: The first is that the children enjoyed each of the hands-on and artistic activities carried out, also in the last sessions, they asked to be the ones to tell the story to their classmates during the" word circle" meetings, they could identify and use basic structures to express likes and dislikes in food, we talked about the life cycle of caterpillars, we worked on English vocabulary about fruits, colors, and numbers. But the most important part of all this beautiful process is that they enjoyed each session. The repetitive structure of the class helped significatively to counteract the disruptive behaviors of the group. The organization, predictability in the steps of the class structure, the repetition of the vocabulary of the story, and the application of the hands-on activities were key factors for their literacy process not only in Spanish but also in English since they were able to associate and recognize letters, words, sounds, images and connect them with a context of the story with their own experiences.

10 Data Collection Techniques

This part of the project is vital to keep the cycle flexibility of the action research process. All the further actions and transformations of the action research cycle will need solid foundations (Burns, 1999). I carried out the data analysis through classroom observations, interviews, and students' artifacts. I register every class session in a journal to collect

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information to keep track of my process as a practitioner. Hitchcock & Hughes (1995) stated

that a journal is a place where the teacher can have a conversation with themself, review the

process, generate new ideas, or take different directions. Therefore, the journal I kept during the

process was imperative to contrast the action plan I proposed at the beginning of the project, also

It was essential to register my students' responses and reactions to the process and make the

necessary changes to my action plan. All these written records were very useful for the final

analysis.

11   Findings and Interpretations

The data that was collected was coded into four different categories. The idea of coding

and triangulating is summarizing the most essential aspects that are related to the objectives of

the research. To arrive at these categories, it was necessary to triangulate the most relevant

factual aspects extracted from my journal, from the interview to my CT, and from my student's

artifacts that I was collecting during each class session and that gave me an account of their

progress. The interview with my cooperating teacher allowed me to have another perspective on

the effects that the students had with the activities of reading aloud and the English classes on

their reading and literacy processes. Regarding students' artifacts, I designed a checklist of the

stages of literacy development where the kids of the group were placed, in this checklist table I

registered the children's achievements. This process was possible by selecting five student

artifacts these were chosen to analyze in which phase of reading and writing my students were.

The main concepts that emerged from the data comprised: The book experience,

Responses to the activities, Classroom management, and School constraints: the influence of the

school environment on Children's learning process.

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11.1 The Book Experience

I discovered that during the second-class session in which I brought a large number of books so that the children could become familiar with the materials, I noticed that they were not used to having contact with books, they did not know how to hold or interact with them. As registered, "… I noticed that the treatment towards books is a bit aggressive, which may indicate that they do not have much contact with stories and books" (Journal entry, March 17th, 2022, personal communication). It means that it is necessary to let them interact more with books, choosing the ones that can be appropriate for their age. In addition, for this action research, the selected big book needs to possess special characteristics. The text must be predictable and rhythmic as much as possible, it needs to have reading patterns that children can assimilate and repeat easily, it must have great illustrative support, and of course, the large size of big books is ideal for younger readers so they can visualize print and other scriptural elements (Young, 2011).

In the last session with the children, the results were positively surprising. Not only in the way the children interacted with the books at the end but also their literacy process and engagement with English also improved markedly. Namely, "…they identified the proper management of books, the rhythms, and steps to tell a story and the parts of a story as well. I think that in this last session I could see that it is possible that using the big books the children can identify the print much more easily, it to a picture. This is reading. They read images by following the sequence of the book and being the main readers who gave their own meaning to the book. Reading is not just coding letters, it is making sense of these by associating images and putting them in context, which in this case was the context of our book and the connections they made with their own lives (Journal entry, May 26th,2022). Therefore, using big books and reading aloud to young children, especially in a cooperating manner, fosters emergent literacy,

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promotes important literacy skills, and stimulates language development and a love for reading. (Duursma et al., 2008).

The special features of big books have allowed children to easily identify words due to the large size of the print. The large and colorful images allowed students to identify the logical development of the story by context and to identify sequences; the beginning, middle, and end of the stories. Another characteristic of big books associated with their size is the easy handling of the book, which facilitates also the interaction in the reading circle.

11.2 Responses to the Activities

One of the most rewarding findings as a practitioner was noticing that despite so many adverse environmental conditions, the children were able to connect with the materials and the class session activities. Their attitude was always loving and positive, especially towards hands-on activities. They had a special connection with the "word circle" and the reading aloud "The very hungry caterpillar" big book, they did it exactly as I showed them on the first day.

> "…The children's reaction was beautiful. They were always very open to the activities
>
> that I proposed to them. They mainly loved everything related to crafting. In this last
>
> session, they were very happy because they had the opportunity to tell me the story just as
>
> I did with them." (Journal, May 26th, 2022, personal communication)

This indicates that every child, regardless of their circumstances, is drawn to colors, drawings, to paint. Children imitate their adult role models, especially their teachers. Through repetition and a predictable routine preestablished with each reading aloud, the children were imitating and internalizing patterns of reading. The conditions to stimulate students' emotions and brain processes were given so they responded with all their openness and potential. They expressed remarkable enjoyment towards the activities and materials that were presented during

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the class, they could manipulate different textures to develop hands-on activities, and they had three big books available which they could freely touch and read in pairs or small groups; hence children build knowledge if the teacher provides the right conditions.

The theory of the conditions of learning gives us an insight into the previous ideas. This theory presents eight conditions (a) immersion, (b) demonstration, (c) engagement, (d) expectations, (e) responsibility, (f) employment (g) approximation, and (h) response. These represent a whole model of literacy learning that is flexible, in which the learners relate and experiment with all their senses, and ways of approaching the texts, and the teacher models and immerses the learners in different forms of texts that are appropriate for their ages (Rushton et al., 2003).

11.3   Class Management

I realized that class management was key in this diverse group. I found that the number of students had increased significantly. They were this year in a smaller classroom and with more children with various diagnoses and special needs. I observed that to carry out my action plan effectively and pleasantly for the children, I would need a different arrangement in the classroom or other space in the school, and I also knew immediately that I needed to create an adequate learning environment that would prevent possible disruptive behavior typical of numerous groups. "[...]I found that the number of students had increased, I saw many new children, and the classroom assigned this year to the group seemed very cramped for so many children". (Journal entry, March 10th, 2022, personal communication). The classroom was too small for so many students. They were divided into long rows and lines. These conditions did not allow the possibility to make a round table, or to have eye contact with all the students. This feature was an obstacle to developing a reading that involved the whole group.

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11.3.1 *Splitting up the Class or Class Grouping*

Classroom management was remarkably challenging in this group, and that aspect directly influences the learning processes of the children. Özyürek as cited in Çinar (2022) describes classroom management; behavior management to prepare students for the learning and teaching process, arranging the physical structure of the classroom, and eliminating or changing the behaviors that prevent teaching.

> In addition, for the cooperating teacher, it is important to improve group management before starting the teaching process, the characteristics of that class make classroom and discipline management very challenging. According to her, "[…] the number of students determines the quality of teaching. A large number of students do not allow meeting the particular needs of each child […]" (Teacher interview, June 2022, personal communication)

> "[…] the number of children per classroom does not allow teachers to have good pedagogy and didactics at the time of starting classes, the group is so large. Reiterating every time, every moment how respect for the other should be handled. It is the whole process of coexistence before the pedagogical process begins because it is very difficult to start academic activities with a group that is so diverse from their ages […]" (Teacher interview, June 2022, personal communication)

> Consequently, I came upon the need and the possibility of splitting up the group to be able to carry on the planned activities, the CT supported me with this strategy. "[...] I had the idea of dividing the group into two groups so that the number of students would decrease, and the children could enjoy the story more." (Journal entry, March 17th, 2022, personal communication)

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11.3.2 *Word Circle*

All of the above led to the implementation of the "word circle" as a response and a strategy for class management; by splitting up the group, one part of the group stayed in the classroom and the other part went with me to the playground to form the word circle. It was an opportunity to enjoy the story and the activities outside the classroom, but it mostly represented a space for children to talk and to be heard and seen.

> [...]Loving educates. If we create a space that welcomes, listens, in which we tell the truth and answer questions and give ourselves time to be there with the child, that child will become a thoughtful, serious, responsible person who will choose from itself. (Vila, 2017, p. 1)

11.4 School Constraints: the Influence of the School Environment on Children's Learning Process

I found that many external factors affected the children's concentration and levels of connection to the classes. Even though children normally have quite short attention spans, some of my students additionally had certain special educational needs, TDH among others, the constant noise of the school, and the interruptions that constantly occur in the classroom mean that children's learning is always impaired.

> "…One of the most worrying and recurrent obstacles has been the noise in the institution added to the constant interruptions that the children have all the time. Not only the outside noise but also from other students who seem to disrespect the activities that other students are doing. Today I had to ask three upper-grade students to please wait a few minutes for us to finish the activity with the children because they needed the space to

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finish the activity without too many distractions" (Journal entry, March 17ᵗʰ, 2022, personal communication)

It means that even though the children gave their maximum effort to connect with the activities the school environment seems to affect significantly their performance and their levels of attention.

A supportive school environment is essential to have an optimal educational experience. According to neuroscience and the sciences of learning, effective learning at the school depends on physical, psychological, cognitive, social, and emotional conditions that just a positive school environment can offer. (Darling & Cook, 2018, p 1)

12   Conclusions and Recommendations

The data analysis of this action research leads us to the conclusion that it is possible to carry out literacy processes in a contextualized and holistic way. The students showed great progress in their literacy processes, not only in Spanish, but they also had a very positive experience in their first approaches to the English language. Through the special features of big books, students were able to connect to this integral process of literacy by actively participating and listening to a story that all children seem to appreciate. Through the "word circle" strategy, the children had the opportunity to talk about themselves and their lives and they could manage to make connections with reading and express themselves through painting, modeling, and tearing. In addition, they had the space to be the readers of the story, since most of them were holding the book and presenting the story to their classmates. In the end, they appreciated the value of books and were able to internalize reading habits, intonation, and interaction with texts.

In sum, the characteristics of the big books that stood out the most as determining elements in the results of this action research were related to the ease with which the children

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were able to identify vocabulary in the large texts and follow a logical line in the story due to their size and the clarity of the illustrations. The rhythmic reading of the text gave them the opportunity to make predictions about the story, and the repetition of the pronunciation of different words. Through reading aloud, dynamics of student participation and cooperation between them were developed while their classmates told the story. Reading, pronunciation, and writing could be developed from the reading aloud of the book.

On the other hand, multiple conditions of the school's agenda did not allow having the number of planned meetings and the activities that were established in the action plan. Another aspect to highlight is that the conditions of the school do not facilitate a fluid learning environment for the children. The constant noise and other variables significantly affected their ability to concentrate. However, in general, the resilience of the children is evident, because only with some favorable conditions that I modified in cooperation with my CT, they showed great abilities to advance with their learning. This last aspect reminded me once again of the great responsibility as teachers when we create the conditions and humanize our teaching.

Based on my experience, I would recommend to those teachers who are interested in exploring big books or those who are interested in exploring a holistic and contextualized perspective of literacy, that is essential to reflect on the importance of observing the school's context as well as the particularities of the group and the uniqueness of your children to design the class sessions. We usually arrive with high expectations with many books in mind and pre-established activities; nevertheless, it is the context and the children's responses that should lead our interventions and transform our plans. It is necessary to get carried away by children's answers, if they look and feel excited during our lessons as they are learning, it is also a good sign to continue with our plans, materials, and activities. The prime purpose of educators is to

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touch our student's emotions and connect with them, then gradually the contents can be blended, preferably from an inductive approach. Overall, I would recommend that to let yourself get metamorphosed by being a constant learner.

Methodologically speaking, it is necessary to remember that first graders are considered early readers, since they cannot read by themselves the interaction and accompaniment of the teacher is essential. Therefore, big books should be carefully selected for their age and reading level; large text, colorful illustrations, repeating patterns, and a structure that allows easy prediction for children.

Last but not least, children need repetition and predictive actions. This special characteristic of young learners needs to be stimulated in each reading performed by teachers. We should always be modeling how to "think aloud" as a pattern. This way it is possible to foster reading and writing habits in children.

13   Reflections

I believe the practicum experience transcends the academic sphere. Although I have been a teacher for several years, the experience of observing a public institution and sharing with a group called diverse and difficult has taught me one of the most valuable lessons in my life. This group of first-graders and I lived the process of the caterpillar. We began to feed ourselves on that unexpected "word circle", nourishing ourselves with love, sincerity, sweetness, and attentive listening. We nurtured ourselves by being seen and validated. Children learned from me, and I learned from them. Our hearts and the emotions were nurtured through that big book by participating as an accomplice to a literacy process. We also experienced that literacy is and should be sweet for every child who starts it. Education must be transformative, and it should nurture the human being as a whole. We go to school to learn valuable intellectual knowledge to

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function in society. The school should also be a safe space that preserves the multiple human dimensions. This beautiful experience of being a caterpillar with the children and metamorphosing together gave us the wings to live from our own experience that learning should not be a painful process. Through the sweet word a space of freedom and appreciation can also be built into the midst of the adverse conditions that life sometimes offers us.

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