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Literacy as a social practice in pre-school education: A case study in areas at risk of social exclusion

La alfabetización como práctica social en Educación Infantil: Un estudio de casos en zonas en riesgo de exclusión social

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Abstract

Literacy in urban spaces where there are structural situations of poverty and social exclusion requires an in-depth knowledge of the practices and events that are developed in these spaces. The research aims to describe literacy events and their social value in various domains: home, school, neighbourhood and other communities. The research was carried out according to a collaborative, ethnographic approach following a multiple-case study design. The cases are represented by three preschools from Seville. Data collection was carried out through interviews, participant observation, written documents, photographs, and videos, and concluded with the creation of mapping. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and the New Literacy Studies (NLS) framework were used to analyse the information collected. Findings show that the development of literacy can be explained by the way in which each child internalises the social values of reading and writing. Values related to literacies at home, school, neighbourhood and other communities become a key factor in children's schooling and, on average, in the content, ways and media used for their discourses.

Resumen

La alfabetización en espacios urbanos en los que concurren situaciones estructurales de pobreza y marginación social requiere de un conocimiento profundo de las prácticas y eventos que tienen lugar en dichos espacios. Esta investigación describe los eventos alfabetizadores y su valor social en los dominios hogar, escuela, barrio y otras comunidades. Se ha desarrollado según un enfoque etnográfico colaborativo con un diseño de estudio de casos múltiples, representados por tres centros de Educación Infantil de la provincia de Sevilla. La recogida de información se ha realizado mediante entrevistas, observación participante, documentos, fotografías y vídeos, y ha concluido con la construcción de mapping. El análisis crítico del discurso y la perspectiva aportada por los Nuevos Estudios de Literacidad (NEL) han servido de referente para el análisis de la información recogida. Los resultados muestran que el desarrollo de la alfabetización puede ser explicado a partir del modo en que se interiorizan los valores sociales de la lectura y la escritura. El valor concedido a la alfabetización en diferentes dominios se convertirá en un factor clave de la escolarización y en un referente del contenido del discurso y de los modos y medios elegidos para comunicarlo.

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Introduction

Several reports obtained from ESCALA tests (7 years old children), carried out in Andalusia (2010-2017), indicate poor literacy development of pupils in their second year of primary education (7-8-years old). Institutional actions performed until now have not managed to improve these results, especially regarding the literacy of families with low socioeconomic status (hereinafter SES). The current lack of information about the early literacy of 5-7-year-old children has made it difficult to be sure about what could be effective in terms of improving early literacy and subsequent reading development (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas [CIS], 2016a, 2016b; Millán, 2016). Reading and writing studies have exclusively focused on school literacy and on information obtained from the sales of children's and young people's books, neglecting other reading and writing practices which use Information and Communication Technologies (hereinafter ICT) (Williams, 2009). Consequently, little is known about a large part of literacy which, during the 21st century, has developed through new forms of learning based on the social and interactive nature of ICT in children's daily life (Bigum, 2003).

Literacy starts when children begin to interact in their environment. Currently, literacy practices are developed in different social, spatial and temporally-situated spaces. In each of them, literacy acquires a different social role (Heath, 1983), creating a key distinction for research between *domain* and *space*. Space is the place where a literacy event is performed, for instance, reading posters displaying the price of fruit in the local market or writing a shopping list in the kitchen. However, domain sets these practices within the specific space where they have been created, for example, the shopping list belongs to a family domain and reading the price of fruits belongs to a neighbourhood domain (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). Children's literacy takes place in the domains of school, family and other communities (Duursma, Meijer, & De Bot, 2017).

The frequency of a literacy event (such as reading a textbook) performed in a specific space (for example, at school) finishes with the creation of social values of literacy practices (a reading and/or writing activity identified with a certain space and an attributed social and personal value [Street, 1997]) assigned to a particular domain (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). This social value of literacy practices allows us to know where the written discourse appears, what role it plays, how its power is presented and how it should be interpreted from a social perspective (Barton & Papen, 2010). The omnipresence of literacy in our society obliges us to reconsider how the different practices interact (Compton-Lilly & Green, 2011). The ICT role raises a new concept of space and printed discourse genres which are transformed into hybrid and unstable genres in social networks (Merchant, 2009).

Children interact daily with other individuals in different physical (classrooms) and virtual (cyberspace) spaces (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), and live with digital and print literacy systems (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000). All these elements determine the creation of affinity spaces (Gee, 2004), which are spaces of interaction based on interests, purposes and practices where children develop a complex literacy in their daily life (Sheehy & Leander, 2011). In this sense, other researches do address those literacy elements related to popular culture which children receive in their family environment (e.g. television, computer games, traditional songs, etc.) (Gregory & Williams, 2000) and how these elements interact with school literacy and assume a fundamental role in the creation of social values in children's literacy (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007).

Poverty and social exclusion in certain contexts complicate the development of a complex literacy which characterises our current society. This paper focuses on this concern and is based on literacy processes carried out in urban areas at risk of social exclusion. This study also analyses practices developed inside and outside school (Marsh, 2011; Mackey, 2010), where

children interact with the use of printed and multimodal digital discourses (Hill, 2010), which can show the social values of literacy in each of the domains in which they develop (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2007). In conclusion, our paper is aligned with the current research focused on reading and writing which addresses both the diversity of literacy practices in different social domains and the social values these practices acquire in the heterogeneous population participating in our study (Pahl & Allan, 2011).

The need to optimise school interventions regarding children literacy, located in urban areas with structural situations of poverty and social exclusion, requires starting from the in-depth knowledge of social values of literacy in the affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) of these communities. For that reason, this paper addresses the following objectives:

1. To describe pupils' events in various domains: home, school and other communities.
2. To determine the social value of literacy practices in the social and cultural context of the sample.

Method

This research takes a collaborative approach based on an ethnographic method (Heath & Street, 2008; Street, 2010). In this approach, children also play the role of ethnographers by collecting evidence about their literacy practices and events as well as contributing to the data analysis (Pahl & Pool, 2011; Clark, 2005). Children identify their practices, place them in a space and relate them to different mediators.

Our research design corresponds to a multiple-case study (Yin, 2014). Each case is represented by a different urban context at risk of social exclusion and is considered as a special educational care centre by the local authority. These schools present different characteristics regarding teaching methods, teaching staff, type of classroom grouping, spaces where teaching is developed, and participation of the community. In each school, a group of pupils

and families with different family structures and literacy levels has been selected.

Sample

The sample for our study consists of 3 children, who are 5 years old and at risk of social exclusion, as well as their families and supervising teachers. Each child is enrolled in a different school in Seville and is part of the whole sample participating in the I+D APertURA research (EDU2017-83967-P)¹. These schools are located in peripheral neighbourhoods (Polígono Norte and Polígono Sur in Seville) where both structural situations of poverty and social exclusion are present. Nevertheless, each participating school shows distinctive features regarding location, nature and the group of people they attend (Table 1).

Because the participants were very young, their parents or guardians were informed about the nature of the study and the conditions of participation. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was sought in line with ethical guidelines, with assurances that the information gained would be used for research purposes only and present anonymously. The research was in accordance with the ethical regulations of the social science department and agreed by the Ethical Committee of Experimentation of the University of Seville.

Data collection

Data collection was based on the creation of *mapping* focused on each child's literacy (Clark & Moss, 2011). In order to do that, photographs were taken in the neighbourhood, at school and in the classroom by using mobile phones and cameras. Pupils were invited to include photographs of their environment: school, home, neighbourhood and other communities (Clark, 2010). The process of *mapping* was carried out individually and was followed by an in-depth interview with children, which addressed questions related to reading and writing interests, preferred literacy spaces, media and literacy

Table 1
Description of schools and children

Cases	Contextual and literacy data
School 1 (Luisa)	Luisa is a five-year-old girl enrolled in the second cycle of pre-school education, in a State School with special educational care, located in Polígono Norte in Seville. This school receives 400 pupils from 33 different nationalities and a total of 13 pupils coming from a slum settlement. The school has two groups in the stage of pre-school education with a total of 47 pupils. Luisa is under the tutelage of her paternal grandmother, who shares custody with social services. Her family lives in a social housing and their incomes come from the social assistance and a non-contributory retirement pension.
School 2 (Rocío)	Rocío is a five-year-old girl enrolled in the second cycle of pre-school education, in a State School located in Seville. The school is formed by 65 pupils belonging to the pre-school education, coming from Polígono Sur, in Seville. She lives in an extended family context (parents, siblings and grandparents). Her parents received high school studies and both have a stable employment. Rocío lives in a social housing within a well-cared for environment. Her personal space at home allows her to develop.
School 3 (Curro)	Curro is a five-year-old boy enrolled in the second cycle of pre-school education, in a State School with special educational care, located in Polígono Sur in Seville. The school only has one group in each stage with only 17 pupils enrolled in the pre-school education stage, but only 11 pupils regularly attend classes. The school is part of an Educational Network and the social services of the area are located inside it. Most of the children's families come from an old slum settlement. Curro also lives in an extended family context.

mediators involved in the process. Interviews were recorded on audio/video. Table 2 lists the elements of the analysis which were taken into account to collect information through interviews, conversations and classroom observations. Similarly, table 2 includes the questions asked during the interview (such as where, when, with whom, and what they like to read and write) related to children's literacy events and the social value given to such events. Finally, classroom observation focused on the same elements that were included in the interview in order to contrast children's opinions on literacy events.

The interpretation of *mapping* was based on records obtained during the participant class-

room observations, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with teachers, families and other literacy mediators, such as friends, neighbours, organisations members, NGOs and religious communities with whom they usually interact (Rowse & Pahl, 2007).

Data analysis

The analysis of *mapping*, classroom observations and interviews was carried out using the epistemological framework of social semiotics (Van-Leeuwen, 2005), in which the understanding of multimodal communication is approached from a qualitative research perspective (Dicks, Soyinka & Coffey, 2006). Our data analysis was based on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough,

Table 2
Elements considered in classroom observations and interviews

Elements of analysis	Description of events	Values of practices
Space: school, home, etc.	Where do you (does he/she) like reading and writing?	Why do you want to learn to read and write? For what?
Media: mobile phone, paper, blackboard, etc.	What media do you (does he/she) like using to read and write?	Why? For what?
Time: morning, afternoon, before going to bed, etc.	When do you (does he/she) like reading and writing?	Why? For what?
Literacy mediator: teacher, father, mother, siblings, etc.	With whom do you (does he/she) like reading and writing?	Why? For what?
Contents: reading and writing topics and artefacts.	What do you (does he/she) like reading and writing?	Why? For what?

Table 3.
Type, number and duration of records

Data collection	Number	Time
Reports, drawings, written productions, etc.	803	
Audio recordings of interviews		36h 14'
Video recordings of interviews		34h 21'
Photographs	1,365	

2003) and multimodal critical discourse analysis (Kress & Van-Leeuwen, 2008; Machin & Mayr, 2012) in which literacy social practices were represented in children's multimodal discourses through different ways of representation.

A co-analysis approach was taken in which both the researcher and participant children were involved. This type of analysis aims to achieve a shared interpretation from a two-stage process. The first stage was mainly preparatory, its purpose being to establish a familiar relationship between the researcher and participants, who had previously shared spaces, activities and informal conversations. As a result of this personal relationship, each party knew their previous ideas and their personal perspective on the literacy process. The second stage was based on the creation of a graphic organization of the information collected through photographs or other artefacts (Cornish, Gillespie & Zittoun, 2014). In our study, a template was used in the form of a coordinate axis in which the four domains considered (home, school, neighbourhood, organisations/church) were identified in the quadrants. Children placed photographs and artefacts in the different quadrants as they saw fit. In the same way, when they considered it necessary, they drew, wrote in the quadrants, or identified sounds and colours related to these domains. Similarly, researchers asked questions such as those listed in table 2 for each domain analysed. The information obtained from these questions allowed the researchers to obtain a first draft with children's interpretations. Finally, this version was shared with children up to the point of getting a shared level of interpretation of literacy in the different domains (Clark, 2011).

Results

The description of the literacy practices developed by the different cases will be ordered in the following way: home, school, neighbourhood and other communities.

Literacy practices in the home domain

Luisa² chose photographs which represented the use of mobile phones and social networks (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram) in order to create her *mapping*. She downloads and plays children's videogames through her grandmother's mobile phone (Clan, Candy Crush, etc.). Similarly, she uses this mobile phone in order to write WhatsApp messages to her father and aunt, and she accesses Instagram and Facebook in order to see the photos which her siblings and closest neighbours upload ("I send WhatsApp messages to my father and aunt Mari, but she doesn't answer me, she is always sleeping because she has a baby [...], and I access Facebook to see my neighbours' things"). During the interview, Luisa told us that she spends much of her time watching cartoons on television, even in the early morning. In addition, she uses YouTube to watch videos and listen to music (mainly reggaeton). Hand-writing is very poor in this domain, where a letter to Santa Claus is the only identified writing practice.

Three home literacy practices were identified by Rocío in her *mapping*: first, the use of the mobile phone in order to write WhatsApp messages to her closest relatives; second, the tablet to play certain programmes and watch some videos on YouTube; and, lastly, television to play videogames. She gives great importance

recognises both the mediating role of her teacher and the importance of literacy in the school environment.

School was also chosen by Curro as his favourite place to read and write. The relevance given to this domain is determined by the huge quantity of photographs included in this space. Photographs about children's books and stories from the library are Curro's favourite ones to represent his literacy spaces, copying texts from the blackboard and listening to stories read by his teacher. His *Mapping* shows a photograph of his classroom which represents his school desk and a shelf with books and classroom materials. Another photograph presents a desktop computer with a printer and some speakers which Curro says is used for reading and writing ("I like reading on my classroom chair [...] At school, I like reading and writing on the computer [...], I don't read in the library").

In general, results in this domain present a school which develops the role of literacy mediator through school material (mainly printed material) and oral dynamic activities offered by teachers. School spaces, such as classrooms, libraries, corridors, etc. are designed to familiarise children with the written code and its social value. The three cases are aware of the school role, although not all of them have developed the same degree of social value of school literacy. Thus, Luisa considers that she has to go to school in order to learn, although she thinks it is boring because ICT is not used ("It is important to read and write because when I grow up, I'll be able to read [...], write and everything, in order to learn things, if I don't learn, I don't know things [...]. School is like "Manos Abiertas" ["Open Hands" (Social organisation run by volunteers)], it is boring, I can only use computers with adults and I don't like writing on the notebook because it seems like homework"). On the other hand, Rocío feels happy at school and



Figure 2. Rocío's Mapping.

has assumed the social value given to literacy in this institution.

Literacy practices in the neighbourhood domain

The photographs chosen by Luisa to represent her neighbourhood include different types of discourses related to the instructions on how to use children's games in parks, opening and closing times, advertisements and street signs, etc. ("I like reading street signs because we have to read fewer things than in books"). This *mapping* shows the high level of maturity acquired by Luisa in her development of literacy social values, and naturally includes multi-modal discourse readings in the diverse social environments of her neighbourhood: "The graffiti which is in my neighbourhood is very beautiful. I read graffiti because I have to read and they are nice things. Look, here is a heart and there is another thing [...]. I read street signs, papers thrown on the floor [...]. I also read things from the ONCE [Spanish organisation of blind people] kiosk, my grandmother buys raffle tickets there").

On the other hand, Rocío's *mapping* represents the neighbourhood domain as an area



Figure 3. Curro's Mapping.

where certain literacy activities can be developed with her parents. In fact, Rocío chose two photographs of her neighbourhood which represent a public library and an exhibitor of children's books. This situation allows us to understand how her family has also influenced her neighbourhood domain, since it offers a complementary alternative to school and builds up an interest in reading and writing which shows the literacy social value in her family environment. Finally, Curro's *mapping* represents the neighbourhood domain with just one photograph, a mobile phone ("I watch videos on my mobile phone in the street"). This photograph is shared with the home domain since, in both cases, Curro uses his mobile phone to watch films.

The neighbourhood domain is a space interpreted by children as opposed to the most usual literacy practices carried out in other domains, such as school or home. The literacy practices developed in the neighbourhood spaces do not transform them into domains from the perspective of some children. Rocío and Curro are not clearly aware of their neighbourhood as a domain, while Luisa shows a feeling of belonging to her neighbourhood. She identifies the practices of the different domains and knows

their differences and their social values. On the contrary, the literacy practices that Rocío and Curro develop in their neighbourhood are a continuation of those developed in the home domain, although they present important differences regarding the type of practice performed ("I don't read in the street. I go to the library with my mother and sister and borrow books", Rocío pointed out).

Literacy practices in other discourse communities

The domain related to other discourse communities was represented by three photographs in the case of Luisa. These photographs represented activities which the child usually develops in the different organisations she attends in the afternoon following the instructions given by social services. Luisa related the photograph of one particular organisation with a bookshelf and some reading tasks carried out with the social workers ("In "Manos Abiertas" ["Open Hands"] I read stories, there are many story books there"). The second photograph chosen represents a desktop computer and this allows her to access audio-visual content and the internet ("I like the computer because I can type, paint and watch cartoons, and I use it in "Manos Abiertas"). On the other hand, Rocío left this section empty and Curro just drew something which represents a storybook like the ones he finds when he goes to the church with his father. Curro identified this space as a domain with a clear literacy nature, where reading possesses a precise social value.

Children's literacy events and practices are also developed in other discourse communities of their neighbourhood. On the one hand, the church (which Curro attends), and, on the other, the Open Hands initiative (which Luisa is required to attend) offer opportunities to read and write out of the family and school environment. In the case of Luisa, the mediators are the social workers, while in the case of Curro, the

mediators are his parents (“I go to the church with my mother and father [...], I also read lots of stories in the church”).

Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of *mapping* demonstrates a clear distinction between the cases studied. The development of literacy is related to the way in which each child internalises the social values of reading and writing in different spaces. The cases analysed for this research allow us to determine how the literacy values are already present in five-year-old children. The social value of literacy is supported with the work carried out at school. However, the differences displayed by the children evince the fundamental role played by the literacy mediators outside school (Pahl & Allan, 2011). The case of Luisa demonstrates how the social value of literacy is developed through raising awareness of reading and writing in the different spaces. This case also highlights the role played by the literacy mediators in deprived social contexts where families give little social value to the literacy carried out in the family domain. In contrast, Curro only has the mediating input of his teacher, and to a certain extent, of his father. As a result, he has little awareness of the social values of reading and writing in non-school spaces.

The development of literacy at school also presents differences between the cases analysed. The social value which participants give to literacy varies between a greater and a lesser degree of the communicative sense of written discourse. Literacy learning at school acquires a different social value in each of the cases studied (Barton & Papen, 2010). The case of Luisa represents the raising of awareness needed to develop knowledge of the written code with the purpose of social promotion and personal development. Rocío addresses her literacy learning as a way of accessing information in some reading books and computer games. On the contrary, Curro presents certain

ways of learning related to reading and writing, but he does not know the social purpose of literacy. School, as a literacy mediator, has little impact on children’s assumptions about value of reading and writing within its scale of priority values. Therefore, schools have not always been able to adapt their literacy process to the characteristics of a context which requires different literacy events and practices. Schools have tended to teach in a uniform way by giving an answer in which cognitive aspects take precedence rather than valuing and promoting the social value of reading and writing (Gee, 2004).

In our research, families assume a relevant role in the creation of social values of children’s literacy. They contribute, to a greater or lesser extent, to raising awareness about the importance of reading and writing. In none of the cases studied do families give a literacy value similar to the school’s literacy model. Nevertheless, families encourage the use of ICT for two different purposes: one is communicative (WhatsApp, Instagram, etc.), the other is audiovisual entertainment (videogames, films, etc.). Differences found in our cases are focused on the degree of interaction carried out through ICT and children’s consumption of audiovisual entertainment (Duursma et al., 2017). Luisa uses ICT in order to create multimodal texts with a communicative purpose and to access information related to her immediate environment. However, Curro uses ICT with the purpose of consuming audiovisual material.

Awareness of the literacy value in the domains of neighbourhood and other discourse communities was the poorest one within the children’s *mapping*. The age of children could explain why there is little awareness of the literacy input that both domains represent, given children’s dependency on their families. Nevertheless, there are certain differences between the cases studied (Sheehy & Leander, 2011). Luisa becomes aware of the input

received from her neighbourhood through the opportunities offered by the walks with her grandmother (shops, ONCE kiosk, park, etc.) and the different organisations she attends. Rocío relates the development of literacy to visiting the library, although she is not aware of the literacy environment of her neighbourhood. Finally, Curro lacks literacy interaction in his neighbourhood and does not identify it as a literacy space. In conclusion, the literacy developed in the neighbourhood domain is an extension of the literacy carried out in the home domain even though they are carried out in different spaces.

This paper presents the first stage of a larger research, named I+D APertURA (EDU2017-83967-P), which focuses on the literacy processes of five-to-seven-year-old children who are at risk of social exclusion. Data presented in this paper are part of wider research which includes pupils, their families, teachers and other people who are part of the communities of practice in the same neighbourhood. The use of new co-analysis techniques and the incorporation of different literacy resources in children from the same area will lead to the creation of an intervention proposal based on literacy from a social and situated perspective. Our paper has presented a multiple-case design in which the literacy practices and the social awareness developed in a sample of children from different neighbourhoods at risk of social exclusion are analysed. In conclusion, the diversity of literacy practices and values in low SES families illustrate, in our research, the complex educational challenge of literacy in the 21st century.

Notes

1. The whole sample of the I+D APertURA research (EDU2017-83967-P) consists of 33 children who are 5 and 6 years old, their families (n=33) and supervising teachers (n=8).

2. The names used in this paper do not correspond to the children's real ones.

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