

CAPÍTULO 8. The Relief of Words Reading aloud from the experience of Entrelibros Association

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INTRODUCTION

When we associate the terms *education* and *health*, the statement that immediately comes to mind is that of “education for health”, understood as a set of strategies and practices aimed to inform and prevent diseases. In the previous sentence, the term ‘education’ has a meaning that includes not only the act of educating but also the space where the education takes place, since schools are considered fundamental areas for promoting health. However, the last statement does not limit the different connections between both terms. As an example, we can think of learning disabilities like the Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or the Nonverbal Learning Disorder (NLD), their influence in scholar failure is very relevant. Other could be the presence in schools of children with problems such as diabetes or food allergies, that usually affect their normal school development and integration or, prolonged hospital stays where their necessary educational assistance is an attempt of not detaching sick kids from school assignments. The last could be the influence in health of suffering and frustrations as a consequence of the relationships with their school companions. Health and education are imbricated in many ways.

Moreover, when we talk about childhood, health and education, we tend to think more in physical than in psychological aspects. Usually, the meaning of education for health is related to speeches and practices that tend to avoid obesity, drug use or pregnancy, as an example. This means that they refer to conducts that have to do more with the body than with emotional or affective matters. However, the latter more often and intensely determine well-being and health in childhood. This imbalance often minimizes situations and behaviours, which are the origin of most discomfort and failure.

These considerations are present in the activities developed by Entrelibros Association, an independent, non-religious and non-profit organization sustained by volunteers from all ages whose principal goal is to make books present in people’s life, especially in children’s, in a pleasant, motivating and compromised way. Entrelibros Association has an ethic view of reading, framed in a vision of education that makes reading one of its basis (Mata, 2010) but, that is not limited to work only in classrooms. Reading aloud, which by essence tends to group instead of isolating, is perceived like an enjoyable way to relate to others, to feel integrated and to get involved.

Some of Entrelibros Association activities are developed in hospital settings and in psychological assistance areas.

At the Child Hospital of Granada activities are led in four different spaces: The Hospital Classroom (Aula Hospitalaria), rooms, the Paediatric Oncology Unit and the Emergency Room. In each one of them, reading has a company and encouraging function. Reading aloud activities provide words that seek peace, dialogue, joy and reverie.

At San Cecilio University Hospital readings are held in the Hospital’s School Classroom (Aula Escolar) and in the waiting room before the doctor’s office. As in the Child Hospital, readings are directed to

hospitalized kids, but in this case also to outpatients, their parents, relatives and caregivers. We consider very important everyone’s participation in the readings because their benefits are not only for the affected children but also for the caregivers.

At ADERES Association (Association for the Development of Social Relations) carries out a project called “*Exprésate*” (express yourself) that is done with children that have difficulties of interaction because of psychic, physical alterations or social problems. The aim in these cases is using books to create spaces for relationships, expression and communication that could facilitate the integration of kids with different capacities.

In all this cases, children’s health and well-being are affected in one way or another. Reading aloud activities carried out by the members of Entrelibros Association accomplish functions that go further than mere entertainment or school homework. Happiness procured by those readings has much deeper roots and consequences.

READING TO OTHERS AND WITH OTHERS

The value and influence of words in the general being of people is unquestionable. In every culture, there have been spaces where in one way or another, language has been used as a way of expressing and interpreting the personal experience, as a relief of emotions or a way to conflict resolution. Several therapies use the word as a basis on their practices, through the spoken word (Frankl, 1969; Vaughan, 1997) or through the written word (Pennebaker, 1997; Lepore and Smyth, 2002). Concepts such as bibliotherapy, poetrytherapy or narrative therapy all share the idea that poetic language acts as a balm, a relief, an encouragement, a release and, it helps giving sense to the own experience (White and Epston, 1990; Mazza, 2003; Iaquina and Hipsky, 2006). The physical and psychological positive effects of laughter in human health are well known (Martin, 2001; Bennett and Lengacher, 2006, 2007), just as they are in art (Malchiodi, 2003; Rubin, 2010) or music (Taylor, 1997; Wigram, Pedersen and Ole Bonde, 2002). All this procedures oriented to provide well-being and favouring mental and physical health, inspire and encourage the activities of Entrelibros Association.

Entrelibros Association does not comprehend reading aloud as a simple hobby but as a form of attention and personal stimuli. This is due to the fact that psychological benefits are visible and not only under circumstances of personal or social crisis (Petit, 2009), but also under normal circumstances. Leisure and cultural involvement are both sources of personal well-being (Gross and Ravagnan, 2013). Therefore, education, seen as a central part of cultural activities in humanity, has a big impact in health condition.

We have included two key concepts from psychotherapy and psychoanalysis to our reading practices, conversation and listening. The reason for that is not strictly therapeutic: we do not use books thinking that the people that we face are “ill” or “affected” by any pathology. We do not act with the idea to be repairing some psychic mechanism. These concepts work as a guidance for us. We consider them effective tools to understand and carry on reading aloud activities. The paradox is that therapeutic situations often arise, even when reading without therapeutic pretensions. This is due to the perception that listeners have of the main activity. They do not relate it to medical treatment or recovery. That feeling makes them more reliant and unconstrained, which stimulates the desire of talking and sharing with others.

Reading aloud to one listener or to many of them, stimulates and facilitates conversation, especially in hospital settings. It is not a forced conversation and it is not related to school. It flows freely at the pace of participants. Conversations are not lead deliberately although we may ask, give an opinion, suggest or introduce something, etc. A not forced conversation means that we are not anxiously looking for a good conversation and that reading not inducing a meaningful one, is not considered a failure. A conversation

not occurring might be a rare situation, especially if listeners are children. But, if it did happen, we would not understand silence as a sign of disappointment. We are aware that the fantasies and reveries induced by a literary text may not always find a way to flow. Sometimes, listeners do not want to put them out. However, we do believe that the word “poetry” generally fulfils its main objective; that is to facilitate thinking and feeling even though emotions and reflections may not manifest.

As an example, a hospitalized child interrupts a reading due to the appearance of a dog in the story to talk about his dog with longing and affection. If that confession encourages other children to talk about their dogs, cats or birds, we can be sure that those spontaneous stories are a way to relax, to get involved and to learn. During the minutes that this confidence exchange is taking place, the world turns normal again, evocations take back the life that was interrupted before the hospital and the conversation provides reliance and encouragement. During these situations, books and even more listeners, who are the voice of them, do disappear for the benefit of the listener and his reveries. Books are often nothing but stimuli to make emotions fluctuate.

Those conversations are even more important and necessary when illnesses are more severe. In Paediatric Oncology, as an example, the feeling of distress and isolation is more noticeable than in other sections. Patients, medical staff, family and readers are all aware of this. Older hospitalized children are more aware of their situation. Their conscience is fed by their own suffering and by the mood and expression of the people who are with them.

In those cases, conversation may acquire a more significant meaning as it usually happens. Conversation turns into a necessity, a relief. Conversations are usually between the reader and the listener. Sometimes, parents or companions may also intervene with enthusiasm. Being able to talk about other things or occupying their minds with other thoughts or fantasies, is a relief for them all.

THE WILLINGNESS TO LISTEN

Readers are mediators between texts and patients who are listeners. The main difference between quiet reading and reading aloud is that in the latter, stories are accompanied by a person who offers his or her voice, presence and attention. Entrelibros Association members consider that it is important to set a time for conversation. Reading to others requires the will to spend time with them, without rush or obligations; in order to share feelings and reflections through a book. Reading aloud invites those who are listening to speak, to express themselves. When responses arrive, those reality words that result from literary words, readers turn into listeners. Conversation complements the reading, it provides continuity. Learning to listen is as important as learning to read.

Listening is another key concept for any psychotherapy activity. Entrelibros Association members consider listening as an essential practice. As it was mentioned before, the reading of a text could help to revive memories, to express dreams or to share experiences. The words of the book urge the words of the listener. The verbal expression of those feelings is already therapeutic. But it also needs a receptor that could listen and receive those manifestations and considerations. Conversation as a result of a reading entails being ready for what the listener has to say, without judging, interrupting or underestimating certain opinions but, giving value to what needs to be expressed. Listening is an exercise of hospitality. Readers are not just speakers but also protectors. Expressing your feelings is already a liberating activity and having the reassurance that a confession is well-accepted, doubles the pleasure of the speaker. Readers stimulate and foster at the same time.

Entrelibros Association practices an active listening that is not limited to quietly receive alien words. We naturally give way to listeners but we go further from listening to feel concerned about what they say. We

do not overwhelm them with our opinions but we are not unconcerned either. We believe that a compromise dialogue is favourable. Talking to an adult is always attractive for children who are ill or children who just want to live and grow up.

Listener's comments are usually unexpected, they appear in the reading context but they are not always related to it. There was a story about an elephant of colours who felt unhappy because he did not have grey skin like the rest of the elephants. F. had the necessity to talk about the bullying that he suffered when he went to school. However, in a different occasion and with the same story, A. talked about the problems that he had with his body. He thought that his body was deformed and gross but others had a completely different opinion. Books symbolisms and metaphors are received and understood in a very personal way and that is where their value lies. F. and A. comments were very different from each other but they both had the same function: the catharsis, the relief, “the purification of passions” to use Aristotle terminology. Confessions are not frequently related to the story that it is being read. The words in a book lead to mental associations that are unpredictable and always unique. The words in a text activate memories or desires in the receptor that can be expressed freely. These manifestations might not be related to the text but they are of great value. The most important thing is the will to decide and to share.

As it was mentioned before, those reading aloud experiences do not pursue to cure an illness but to give happiness, courage and trust. This can be easily seen at the Emergency Room. Reading aloud, individually or in a group, is always like a balsam. The further the story develops, little by little, the more the tension decreases. Attention is derived to other matters that are not related to what has led them there. That transitory oblivion has soothing effects.

Once that we have pointed out the value of reading aloud related to health, we would like to mention that at the same time, there is another admirable phenomenon that takes place in the education field. Books are promoted in a different way to school in healthcare or hospital settings. They lose their academic character and are seen as a tool for well-being and personal encouragement. Books are offered as a means of reflection and conversation towards life and themselves. Books are appreciated in a different manner, they acquire a deeper meaning. Thanks to those readings, education reveals its more social aspect. It is introduced as an element that is fully embedded in the life of infants and that influences children physical and psychological issues.

CONCLUSION

Reading, as a practice similar to that of education, gives people benefits of emotional and intellectual character. Reading to others and with others, is a demonstration of affection and integration. Entrelibros Association reading activities have an encouraging function that directly affects the health of the children in hospitals or psychological assistance settings. Kind words have a special therapeutic effect but when suffering and despair are present, this repercussion is even more obvious. Reading acquires a deeper and more complex meaning in contexts of personal or social crisis. This reveals that literature and education are closely related to well-being and that it has a clear influence in hospitalized or affected children with any trauma or disorder.

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