



# Self-generated Literacy Practices in Disadvantaged Environments in Chile

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## Abstract

This study explores the role of literacy in disadvantaged environments and the interplay between self-generated literacy practices and their conceptualization of literacy in 7 to 10-year-old Chilean pupils from two different schools located in Santiago, Chile. The study was framed within a participatory approach focused on promoting the children's agency and voice in the research. A range of second-level data materials were collected through interviews with parents, photographs and existing documents. Although at a resources-associated level the sociocultural context did not inhibit the emergence of literacy practices, the context did contribute to the children's understanding of literacy. This study raises the need for considering how children's understanding of literacy influence their involvement and learning about reading and writing as their experiences and perceptions have an important role in their learning process, particularly on how they develop their reading and writing practices. The findings implied that by raising the participants' awareness of the relevance of everyday practices in relation with reading and writing, they are likelier to feel more comfortable and empowered towards their own literacy practices. Particularly, the empowerment of children coming from a disadvantaged background would give them more opportunities to support their learning. By making the children aware of the relevance of their own perceptions and practices, the pupils could gain in confidence, be agents of their learning processes, and have more resources to succeed on the demanding school environment.

**Keywords:** home practices, children's writing, disadvantaged communities, participatory research, Chile

## 1. Introduction

In public discourses, literacy is 'both the purpose and product of schooling' (Cook-Gumperz, 2006, p. 16). School-based conceptions of literacy imply that reading and writing are stratified and can be encapsulated within standardized processes. In addition, schooled literacy is differentiated from the everyday uses of reading and writing. This approach to literacy conceptualizes reading and writing as a set of skills that can be developed without a context (Barton, 2007; Street, 1984). This conceptualization is often adopted in school education. This is especially the case in Chile, where the educational system encourages competition among schools and the evidence that schools provide support for their project is mainly based on assessment. However, in Chile little is known about children's literacy practices at home and how these can support children's literacy learning in school.

In this context, this research explores school and home literacy practices in economically disadvantaged settings in Chile. Given the participants' underprivileged environment, this study explains the role of literacy in disadvantaged environments and the interplay between home and school-based literacy practices. Drawing on Vygotsky's work (1978) on the social constructivist view of learning, children play an active role in their learning (Rogoff, 1990; Rogoff et al., 2007). Therefore, children's experiences and perceptions are crucial in their learning process and the development of their reading and writing (Burnett, Davies, Merchant & Rowsell, 2014). By acknowledging this perspective, children are seen as agents who engage with their environment and peers during the learning process. This perspective determines not only how children learn, but also emphasizes the relevance of their own perspectives about the learning process. On this vein, this study approaches the study of literacy from a social perspective (Street, 2001). As such, it considers social practices and beliefs related to reading and writing (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984). Learning from a social perspective involves being embedded in a larger ecological and cultural niche (Goldenberg, Gallimore & Reese, 2005). This niche affects and co-constructs the way we learn, and therefore how we construct our understanding of reading and writing. This larger ecocultural niche is the center of both family and school routines.

### 1.1 Research questions and objective

This study raises the need to consider how children's understanding of literacy influences their involvement and learning about reading and writing. I investigate how 7- to 10-year-old Chilean children of Puente Alto and Renca draw on understandings of literacy gained from home and school contexts. Hence, the study seeks to identify 1) what these

children's beliefs about literacy at home and at school and their own writing are; and 2) how these beliefs relate to their home environment and literacy practices.

### *1.2 Context for the study: Literacy practices in disadvantaged environments in Chile*

To understand the social conditions of the participants and their communities, it is necessary to take into account several particularities of Chilean society. Chile is a developing country, in which there is a big difference between the resources available at each socio-economic level (Castillo, Miranda & Carrasco, 2012) and with vast differences across different schools and families (Strasser & Lissi, 2009; Susperreguy, Strasser, Lissi & Mendive, 2007). In addition, the dictatorship opted for a neo-liberal economy that had two contradictory consequences: a fast-growing economy and increasing inequality (Chile has the worst income inequality among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development members and the fourth highest poverty rate (OECD, 2011)). In addition, since the '90s, Chile has reduced its poverty rate by more than 69.7 per cent (CASEN, 2015).

However, this apparent decrease in poverty is mediated by fixed economic indexes that have been widely critiqued by several scholars (as explained by Ávalos, 2007 in an in-depth analysis of the terminology). In 2014, the national poverty line was fixed at \$72,098 Chilean pesos per month, (equivalent to approx. \$114USD). In Chile, the poverty line is determined by the minimum income required to satisfy basic needs: housing, health services, education and economic capacity. In Latin America this method follows the recommendations of CEPAL (Feres & Mancero, 2001). But this index does not reflect the complex social context that families endure.

Children's understanding of writing and literacy is closely developed and embedded in a context. For this study, the notion of context is operationalized through an ecological and cultural niche, as described by Goldenberg et al. (2005). According to these authors, the larger ecological and cultural niche refers to 'the constellation of proximal influences in the child's day-to-day life that shape developmentally significant child experiences' (Goldenberg et al., 2005, p. 26). Therefore, the conceptualization of context proposed by this study is related to the proximal influences that shape children's development.

The eco-cultural niche is embedded in the economic characteristics of the community and the social problems associated with it. In the 1990s the changes in society rendered the understandings of exclusion and marginalization obsolete (Ávalos, 2007), leading to a new multi-dimensional conceptualization of poverty (CASEN, 2015). Since then, the analysis of poverty has shifted from the classic issues of measurement and quantification of needs and difficulties in access to resources, goods and services towards the examination of the structure of opportunities, capacities and individual tools to develop a decent life (Raczinsky & Serrano, 2002, p. 11). This academic shift approached poverty by using the concept of vulnerability, whose characterization of deprived environments involved social problems and/or low socio-economic levels (Brunner & Cox, 1995). Therefore, this is a conceptualization that includes a multidimensional approximation of poverty. In Chile, vulnerability is defined as a 'dynamic condition resulting from the interaction of a multiplicity of risk and preventive factors that occur in an individual life causing a considerable disadvantage between individual, families and/or communities (JUNAEB, 2005). The factors that can cause this disadvantage can be seen in relation to social, economic, cultural, psychological, environmental and/or biological conditions.

This study challenges the traditional notion of poverty by considering a conceptualization that reflects a more multi-dimensional understanding. This conceptualization addresses the social problems that the participants face, without engaging in a more economic- institutional or- sociological characterization which tends to conceive of poverty as a set of fixed indexes. The concept of disadvantage is used here to highlight the complex set of issues that these families face which include the lack of access to some symbolic and material resources. This conceptualization also deals with the participants' own characterisation of themselves. As such, I argue that children are embedded in a larger eco-cultural niche that shapes their agency with regard to learning and writing practices, despite previous research that has only faulted the restrictiveness of home literacy practices in explaining children's constraints to literacy learning in formal education in disadvantaged environments (Strasser & Lissi, 2009). This niche is built on the basis of material and symbolic resources thus affecting children's literacy learning. In this study, I claim that both material conditions and symbolic resources are part of the context that builds on children's literacy learning. All these characteristics (participants' lack of resources for example and social disadvantage) influence the children's literacy learning.

The material conditions of the participants' contexts and its influence are a relevant part of how they face and understand the world and, therefore, literacy. The material conditions in which participants exist impact on the resources they have (both symbolic and material) to practice literacy. As Kalman (2005) has pointed out, "this set of relationships, knowledge, and actions constitute the access routes and modalities of appropriation for learning and using reading and writing" (p. 71). The access to, and availability of, these different resources are an important distinction for this study. Access and availability refer to the distinction between having resources available and the different ways in which these resources can be used. Access is a category that can explain how participants use their knowledge about reading and writing in different specific situations (Kalman, 2005).

## **2. Literature Review: New Literacy Studies**

It is important to establish that learning, literacy in general and writing in particular, occur in particular contexts (Street, 2003). Learning literacy occurs in the practices of and interactions between people in everyday life (Papen, 2007). On

this vein, the framework of understanding that this study supports is very much embedded in an 'integrated historical notion' (Barton, 2007, p. 33). Considering literacy in these terms implies including both the individual and the social in a broader context that can 'shed light on the process of learning' (Barton, 2007[1994]). Thus, it considers social practices and beliefs related to reading and writing (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984).

New Literacy Studies (NLS) challenge purely cognitive conceptions of reading and writing (Barton, 2001). In this approach, literacy is understood as a social practice (Street, 1984); therefore, there are multiple literacies and the predominance of one over another depends on an ideological position that refers to the power relations and social institutions which sustain them (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Education is perhaps the most relevant aspect that sustains literacy. The schooling system determines people's values and understanding of literacy. In relation to the educational context of literacy, Bloome and Green (1991) explain that, since the 1980s, the introduction of new perspectives to the field has led to a series of new understandings that have expanded the concept of literacy, from a more classical psychological conceptualization to a view that theorizes literacy and education as 'social and cultural practices' (p. 50).

On the other hand, vernacular literacies are all the practices that emerge outside formal contexts of education. According to Barton and Hamilton (1998): 'Vernacular literacy practices are essentially ones which are not regulated by the formal rules and procedures of dominant social institutions and which have their origins in everyday life' (p. 247). These practices emerge from the everyday uses that people find for literacy in their lives. These literacies are often self-generated, voluntary and creative. With regard to children's literacy practices, vernacular literacies are an important part of their learning process, although they might not always acknowledge it: 'the curricula of many elementary and primary schools generally do not recognize the place of children's out-of-school literacy practices' (Marsh, 2006). However, an important part of children's learning occurs in contexts outside the classroom, and their own self-generated practices might be more meaningful to them. Vernacular literacies imply that people develop vernacular strategies for learning, which means all the strategies that people develop outside formal contexts of learning (Barton & Hamilton, 2012). As Camitta (1993, p. 229) found in her study on non-school writing by adolescents in the United States, adolescents' vernacular writing is related to practices 'that comprise conventionalized written expressive behaviors that are formulated within the adolescent community, and which are employed for cultural-specific purposes'. In this understanding, writing becomes an act of identity related to adolescent culture. Similarly, children's culture is also expressed through self-generated literacy practices as shown by this study.

The unit of analysis of literacy from a social perspective is literacy practices, which refers to any situations in which literacy has a role to play. This concept was first introduced in 1981 by Scribner and Cole, as a way to emphasize literacy as a 'set of socially organized practices' (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 236). Literacy practice includes: 'common patterns in using reading and writing in a particular situation' (Barton, 2007, p. 36). These practices are cultural, and so they involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships and also include people's awareness, constructions and discourses of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7). Therefore, literacy practices are a complex phenomenon, and they 'include the larger social and cultural meaning that participants ascribe to a particular literacy event' (Reder & Davila, 2005, p. 175). Literacy practices are an abstract construct where the social and the singular work together in a dialectic flow. On the other hand, literacy events refer to "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes" (Heath, 1982, p. 93). Therefore, literacy events are what we (as researchers) can observe and describe. In this study, literacy practices are inferred from literacy events observed at home and at school.

### **3. Method: Using participatory methods to involve children**

This research uses a participatory approach as a frame and case studies as a way of providing an ideological assumption about how to involve the participants in the study. This methodology is built on a base of ideological assumptions about how to deal with the participants and how research can be supportive of, and inclusive for, the community. I focused on promoting children's agency and voice grounded in a participatory approach to engage with the participants as agents rather than subjects of the study.

The purpose of using a participatory approach is to engage with the participants as agents rather than subjects of the study. To do so, I used methods that could contribute to this endeavor by ensuring a joint process that builds on the children as partners in the research (Abbott & Gillen, 1999). In particular, I established a trusting relationship that allows the children an increasing participation along the research.

Participatory research can be rooted in two important issues: minority rights and community empowerment (Blumenthal, 2011). Furthermore, the participatory approach is grounded within conceptual development that encourages the acknowledgement of children as social agents (Mason & Hood, 2011). Considering the participants in this study as people coming from an underprivileged background, a process of reinforcement and empowerment had to be engaged in. I worked with the participants to try to reinforce their knowledge and practices as a valid way of talking about reading and writing (Calderón, 2014).

At this point it is worth mentioning that this was mainly achieved by talking to them in all the formal research contexts, but also in informal conversations carried out at school events or on other occasions. According to Duckworth (2014), talking to participants is a valid way of inducing empowerment. Hence this approach was adopted by considering the cultural characteristics of the participants and how they communicate and build trust relationships. However, as in any

research there is a power relationship between the participants and the researcher (Fleming, 2010). In this case, this relationship was mitigated by the author's knowledge of the context as there were some similarities in relation to the schooling and sociocultural background (See Calderón & Theriault, 2016, for deeper insights about these issues). In addition, the case study approach is especially useful when a context is embedded in the phenomenon (Yin, 1994). The case study was useful in order to understand the children's literacy practices in depth, since the research questions are closely related to the context in which the phenomenon exists. A case-study approach can focus on institutions or individuals (Robson, 1993; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). In this research, both kinds of case study were taken into account. Schools, and pupils particularly, were asked to participate in case studies for the research.

### *3.1 Participants*

The participants are 20 7- to 10-year-old Chilean children from two different schools located in Santiago (Chile). The selection of the participants in this study was made taking into account the methodological approach of the research, therefore, each school was considered as a case study itself. In this sense, the main sampling procedure is based on selecting cases by their willingness to collaborate, the relationship I was able to make with the director and the particularities that made a given school interesting to study. Furthermore, I followed Stake (1995) when choosing appropriate cases. To do this, I based my selection on the idea that every case is important in its own right (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). In this context, I did not consider the representativeness of the schools.

School A is a private school subsidized by the government and located in an urban area. It has two classes per grade with an average of 35 students per classroom. In terms of its sociodemographic characteristics, it is classified by the Chilean Ministry of Education as a middle-class school. This characterization means that parents have a monthly income of between \$380USD and \$450USD. And the parents' average school years were between 11 and 12. This means that they finished compulsory education but did not pursue a higher or tertiary education degree. These characteristics do not mean that there are no students in more precarious situations. In the empirical study I observed that some cases belonged to the lower-middle class. The school is located in Puente Alto, a district in Región Metropolitana, the capital of Chile.

School B is a private school subsidized by the government. This school is located in an urban area and has one class per grade, with an average of 42 students per classroom. The school has been classified as a lower-middle class school by the Chilean Ministry of Education. This characterization means that parents have an income of between \$111USD and \$380USD. In this respect, the fact that this school is characterized as a lower-middle class expresses its borderline situation in relation to the poverty line. The formal education of the parents varies. This school is located in Renca, a district in Santiago, the capital of Chile. This district is characterized as lower middle class with a significant number of homes under the poverty line.

The individual case studies considered the school community in the decision as the selection of participation was done collaboratively with the language teacher of the targeted age. The selection considered the student performance in order to select pupils with regular, high and low performance in general (not only literacy performance).

### *3.2 Data collection*

As for the data collection methods, I carried out semi-structured interviews and home observation over a period of three months. The semi-structured interviews were carried out taking into account of all the core issues; and all the children were asked about the same issues. In addition, I carried out observation as a way to compare the participants' beliefs (addressed in the interviews) with some empirical evidence of how these beliefs are related (or not) to their practices.

Semi-structured observation was carried out at home. For the observation, photographs were used to register visual elements relevant to the concerns of this research. However, the pictures were not intended to contribute to a multimodal systematic analysis. Visual materials were important to elaborate a more elaborate picture of each place observed. The semi-structured observation at home was carried out under the supervision of the parents and involved asking the children to tell me about their daily activities and literacy practices. This was the aim of each visit. However, every participant was different and the observation was closely intertwined with their own particular characteristics. This consideration also impacted on the spaces and the number of objects each family decided to show me. I did not force the families in terms of what to do or how to handle the visits. In addition, as already mentioned, the children led the visits, so there were differences in how the process was carried out.

### *3.3 Ethical matters*

This research follows strict ethical protocols as it underwent the revision and approval of the Lancaster University's Research Ethics Committee. Hence informed consent and information documents were used to grant the agreement of all the participants in this research. Special procedures were carried out to ensure the children's participation. The written consent of tutors and/or parents was complemented with oral consent prior to each interview. Please note that all the names have been changed to protect the anonymity of all the participants in this research.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

The analysis is organized to align with the set of topics that were raised in the interviews and the home observation. I did qualitative software analysis (using Atlas.ti) and the coding was done following a deductive method to analyze the interviews.

#### 4.1 Literacy-related resources

Not many pupils had access to printed resources at home; only two out of 20 had leisure books, three pupils had magazines and newspapers and I found encyclopedias and dictionaries in only three homes. On the other hand, the majority of printed materials and literacy related resources were connected to school opportunities to extend existing literacy practices (Kalman, 2005). Almost all of them (19) had old school materials from their previous years or from older relatives. For example, because of the reading plan at home all the pupils from this school had the book collection the school requested. This practice increased the printed resources and materials at home and in many homes helped as the foundation of a first home library.

However, the physical presence of certain resources does impact on the children's access to certain practices. For example, Roberto (7) enjoys drawing, so I asked him whether he liked comic books but he did not know what a comic was. I proceeded to draw an example for him and he said he would enjoy reading one. This suggests the impact of resources in children's practices. If Roberto had comic books he would probably enjoy reading them.

In relation to encyclopedias and dictionaries, I found that they were all bought many years ago for older family members, such as grandparents or parents. These items were placed in important areas inside the house such as the living room. In Chile, the living room is the most central area in a house dynamic, in which some ornamental objects are usually displayed. In this vein, it was unsurprising that these items were displayed in the living room. What was interesting, however, was the presence of school materials in the living room as well, in a valuable place.

In relation to digital literacy resources, eleven children had a computer at home. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that the availability of these resources at home does not always imply that the children were interested in using them. For example, Roberto (7) engages with the computer only with his brother who is more skilled than him with it.

The children who did not have a computer available at home were still able to engage in activities that involved using a computer. Furthermore, the availability of digital literacy resources did not restrict the participants' engagement with digital literacy practices. For example, Josefina (9) used a computer at the weekends in an Internet café. In this sense, the restricted availability impacted on how they practiced literacy. In these cases, access was not determined by availability as reflected by Luis (10) who enjoyed using computers at an Internet café despite not having one of his own. This suggests that practices are not always affected by the resources at home.

#### 4.2 Children's voices

This section describes how the children portrayed themselves during the interviews and home observation. This portrait aims to understand how the children perceive their relationship with literacy in general. In this sense, this section focuses on the children's voices and their stances viz-à-vis themselves.

Even though these descriptions are influenced by the perceptions of others, the pupils found space to describe themselves in a broader way. For example, María Paz (10) is described as a regular student and she also characterized herself in the same way, but she also thinks that she is doing better than last year, so she is happy and thinks that she is a better student now. By adding this new information, María Paz amended the representation that the teachers gave of her and proposed a new one using her voice:

##### Extract 1. Interview with Maria Paz (10)

- R: *ya ti / cómo te va en el colegio?* (and how is your performance in school?)  
 Maria Paz: *más o menos no más* (so so)  
 R: *ya* (ok)  
 Maria Paz: *ahora me está yendo mejor que el año pasado* (now I am doing better than last year)  
 R: *ya / y te cuesta estudiar o no?* (ok and is it difficult for you to study or not?)  
 Maria Paz: *si / es que a mí me gusta estudiar con alguien* (yes / it is just that I like to study with someone)

Sebastian (7) and Roberto (7) mentioned that they were just regular students (they even used the same words as the teachers). Roberto and Sebastian were described as non-readers by the school but Sebastian perceived himself as able to read:

##### Extract 2. Interview with Sebastian (7)

- R: *ya Sebastián / lo primero que te voy a preguntar es que tú me pusiste que te gustaba leer y escribir* (ok Sebastian / the first thing I am going to ask you about is that you wrote that you enjoy reading and writing)  
 Sebastian: *[asiente]* (he nods)

- R: *te gusta leer?* (do you like to read?)  
 Sebastian: .2 (.2)  
 R: *o no/ no importa lo que respondas* (or not? / It doesn't matter what you answer)  
 Sebastian: *SI* (YES)  
 R: *ya / y qué es lo que te gusta de leer?* (ok / and what kinds of things do you enjoy reading?)  
 Sebastian: *leer las cosas que tengo que leer* (I read what I have to read)  
 R: *ya / y que cosas tienes que leer* (ok / and what things do you have to read?)  
 Sebastian: *las cosas la pruebas las guías* (for the tests and homework)  
 R: *y donde lees todas esas cosas* (and where do you read all that?)  
 Sebastian: *en el colegio* (at school)

Roberto (7) defined himself as a non-reader but a very good writer. This was a pattern among the participants. For instance, he was also described as a non-reader, but he defined himself as a non-reader but a very good writer. By differentiating between reading and writing, pupils construct themselves as writers and construct a broader identity than the ones constructed by the parents and the teachers (Calderón, 2015).

The rest of the pupils (6 out of 20) distinguished their identities completely from the ones that their parents and teachers constructed of them. María (8) is defined by the school and her family as a student who struggles to have a good performance. However, María defined herself as a good reader, and she mentioned that she enjoys reading at home. Manuel (7) and Elisa (9) were described as bad students, but they do not agree with this characterization because they described themselves as good students. On the other hand, Rayen (7) is described as a good student by her parents and teachers; however, she did not seem to be interested in describing herself in those terms. She defined herself in relation to the activities that she enjoys and other interests. In a similar way, Miguel (8) was described as a regular student in respect of his but he was not interested in discussing this issue.

#### 4.3 Literacy events and practices

This section describes the events that I witnessed during the home observation. These events are complemented with the children's understandings and perceptions of these events and the situations stemming from these. According to Kalman (2005), there are three types of situations: literacy-demanding situations, literacy-scaffolding situations and voluntary literacy situations. The first situations require specific knowledge on how to use reading and writing. Literacy-scaffolding situations include opportunities for learning about reading and writing through collaboration with peers or a more knowledgeable other. Finally, voluntary literacy situations denote situations in which people use literacy because they want to (p. 31).

At home I observed different events that contributed to my understanding of how the children perform literacy. I describe some of the events I witnessed and then describe the literacy practices they instantiated.

##### Extract 3. Literacy event 1

Home observation

Roberto (7)

Context:

I arrived at Roberto's house and I and his mother sat at the table to talk about the research and her worries about Roberto's literacy problems. While I was talking to Roberto's mother he and his brother were playing on the computer.

Roberto stands behind his brother looking at the screen. Roberto does not engage with the computer at first. His brother does all the writing, so he writes the name of the game on the computer screen.

In this event, Roberto (7) and his younger brother engaged in online gaming. Roberto's younger brother usually does all the reading and writing on the computer. In this situation, Roberto's younger brother is the more knowledgeable one who scaffolds Roberto's learning, serving as a scaffolding situation between the two brothers. As Roberto loves playing video games on the Internet, I asked him how he does it when his brother is not present. He told me that he memorizes the search words so that he does not have to read or write new words. During a later visit I asked Roberto to show me the games that he and his brother played, and he was able to do a search on Google and get onto the website. This second visit allowed me to corroborate that Roberto learnt by looking at his brother and that they were collaborating to achieve the goal of the game. In a similar way, I was also able to observe how one child studied with a friend.

##### Extract 4. Literacy event 2

Home observation

Scarlet (10)

Context:

I had agreed with Scarlet's mother that we would meet at the school and then walk together to their house. I walked with Scarlet, her younger brother, another schoolmate and her mother. When I arrived at Scarlet's house, Scarlet's mother showed me the house and I started taking pictures of the home's literacy artefacts. While I was taking pictures, Scarlet and her schoolmate went to the bedroom to leave their stuff and then started studying for the test they had the following day.

Scarlet and her friend were sat on the bed and had their school notebooks and textbooks on it. They were talking and using a textbook to study a unit related to poetry. To be specific, they were trying to understand the meaning of the poem, so Scarlet's friend read some of the verses of the poem aloud. After discussing this, they wrote down their agreed understanding of the textbook. They used notebooks only to consult some specific issues of content.

Scarlet (10) and her friend were studying in her bedroom. As language class was difficult for Scarlet, her friend assumed the role of the more knowledgeable one. Later in the visit, her mother asked me to work with Scarlet and her friend on the language homework. When I started working with them, I was immediately the more knowledgeable one, and both Maria and her friend collaborated to answer the questions. At that stage, Scarlet switched her role and was able to contribute to the led discussion. This situation shows how children's agency towards literacy is influenced by the parents' and the school's identity construction of them.

In relation to self-generated writing practices, I found three main types that I describe according to the nature of the practice.

#### 4.3.1 Playing with words

This category involves reading or writing, and includes a wide range of practices, from playing scatergories to doing puzzles, as María (8) mentioned. This practice also involves playing as being the teacher by copying things onto a board as Emilia (9) mentioned, or using the board to study as in the following example:

Extract 5. Literacy event 3

Home observation

Josefina (9)

Context:

When I arrived at Josefina's home I started talking with her mother. While having this conversation Josefina was in the room, playing with her cousins. When I finished talking to Josefina's mother I got closer to the children.

Josefina and her cousin were playing with a board. When I asked them what they were playing Josefina told me that they were playing for the teacher. They had written a reminder that they had a test on the next day.

Although this was a pleasurable self-generated practice, it is also related to school homework. In this, the student has found a self-generated learning strategy that supports her own learning by emulating the teacher's way of working. It is interesting, too, that they emulate setting a test, which, perhaps says something about the educational culture they are experiencing.

This practice also involves the writing required when the children played on the computer. Although none of the children acknowledged this practice as part of their writing practice, there was writing involved. For example, Roberto (7) told me that, when he plays on the computer, normally his brother would do all the writings. However, when I asked him what he does when his brother is not present, he said that he knew how to write words and use a search engine to get to the video games. Sebastian (7) mentioned something similar in relation to the words he used to write in Google to search for video games online (as shown in Roberto's literacy event with his brother). In this regard, Anita (9) also plays at as being a teacher with her younger friends and relatives. This practice is relevant because it is directly related to engaging in literacy scaffolding situations.

Extract 6. Interview with Anita (9)

R: *y a que te gusta jugar?* (and what do you like to play?)

Anita: *me gusta jugar a la profesora / yo hago como que soy la profesora / interrogo a los niños / también jugamos a la mamá* (I like to play the teacher / I pretend I am the teacher / I question the children / we also play being grown-up)

R: *y cómo juegan a la profesora?* (and how do you play teacher?)

Anita: *le enseñamos a leer a los más chiquititos* (we teach the little ones to read)

#### 4.3.2 Art writing and reproduction

This refers to using writing as an ornament for bedroom walls and the hand-writing of names as well as football teams and messages. Through writing, the children found a way of expressing their identity. This practice is related to the materiality of writing. It involves writing their own names and the names of their idols by hand, in beautiful calligraphy, shapes and colours. For example, María (8) and Bernardita (10) had written their names on the walls in special places in their bedrooms (I cannot include pictures of this practice because it would disclose the real names of the children). Josefina (nine) did different hand-writing at home that indicated her favourite football team (ColoColo) and also a message that expressed support for the national Telethon.

In addition, Julian (7) had handwritten quotes from the Bible on display at home. Even though this practice was encouraged by his mother, he happily engaged with it. An extension of this practice would be copying songs, which was mentioned by Scarlet (10). This practice involves copying songs they like in a small notebook or onto a sheet to stick on their walls. This practice also shows part of the children's identity. They only copy stuff they like.

#### 4.3.3 Creative and personal writing

This means that some pupils enjoyed writing stories, fables or poetry. This practice could be described as creative and personal and involves voluntary writing at home. Some female pupils mentioned that they kept a diary where they wrote their feelings and thoughts. Scarlet (10) and Elisa (9) mentioned that they wrote there almost every day. This writing was private and no one else could read it. They kept their diaries hidden, under lock and key.

Similarly, María (8) and Rayen (7) enjoyed writing stories and Damian (10) mentioned that he liked writing fables. Emilia (9) mentioned that she enjoyed writing poetry. Although this practice is self-generated and occurs at home, it is nurtured by school practices and some school lessons. By exercising creative writing, the pupils found a way of diverting school content and proposing new self-generated learning strategies. Josefina (9) and Daniela (10) mentioned that they kept a diary in which to write about their experiences:

##### Extract 7. Interview with Josefina (9)

- R: *y escribes algo más? (and do you write anything else?)*  
 Josefina: *escribo a veces en un diario (sometimes I write a diary)*  
 R: *y cada cuanto escribes en el diario? (and how often do you write in the diary?)*  
 Josefina: *como tres veces por semana (like three times a week)*  
 R: *y / qué cosas escribes? (and / what do you write about?)*  
 Josefina: *lo que me pasa en el colegio / también dibujo (what happens to me at school / I also draw)*  
 R: *y / le lees el diario a alguien? (and / do you read this diary to anyone?)*  
 Josefina: *no / solo yo puedo ver el diario (no / I am the only one who can read the diary)*  
 R: *y / alguien te regaló ese diario? (and / did someone give you the diary as a gift?)*  
 Josefina: *no / es un cuaderno (no / it is a notebook)*  
 R: *a / ya (ah / ok)*  
 Josefina: *y te cuesta más o menos escribir en el diario? (and is it more or less hard to write in the diary?)*  
 R: *encuentro que es más fácil escribir en el diario (: I think that it is easier to write in the diary)*

Josefina's case is relevant because she also mentioned that free writing was something that was easier in comparison to school homework. Another way of doing voluntary writing is one related to the children's digital practices. In this sense, Facebook was mentioned only by two of the 4<sup>th</sup> grade children (Rayen and Luis mentioned having a Facebook account):

##### Extract 8. Literacy event 4

Home observation

Rayen (7)

Context:

Rayen practises karate and most of her friends are in her class, so Rayen does not see her friends every day at school.

Rayen showed me her bedroom and I noted that that she had a laptop on the bed. The laptop was on so I asked her to show me what kinds of games she enjoyed playing. She told me that she really liked Minecraft and explained to me how to play it. While she was explaining the game's mechanics, a Facebook chat indicated that someone was talking to Rayen. I told her that she could answer and she wrote a personal message to a friend.



Rayen's example shows how this self-generated practice emerged from the joy of talking with her friends. Rayen told me that she talks mostly with her best friend. Her mother allowed Rayen to use the laptop and to have Facebook as a way to incentivize Rayen's sociability. Also Ricardo (10) showed great interest in engaging with digital practices:

Extract 9. Literacy event 5

Home observation

Ricardo (10)

Context:

When I arrived at Ricardo's home his mother and I sat in the living room and started talking about Ricardo. This conversation took longer than expected as Ricardo's mother was really worried about his son and told me about his financial and school-related problems. While having this conversation Ricardo was in the room trying to turn on the computer.

During the interview Ricardo was trying to get the computer to work. It was very slow, so he turned it on, went outside to play for a while and came back later. When he came back he started playing on the computer, after I had finished talking with Ricardo's mother.

This event is relevant as it shows how resources play a role in the actual use of and engagement with digital literacy practices. In addition, Julian (7) also had a computer at home, although he did not use it during the visit. Anita (9) mentioned that she used a computer at her mother's house at the weekends, but she did not have a computer available during the week. As well as to all the children who had some self-generated literacy practices, I also talked with some pupils who did not acknowledge any home literacy-related practices except for school-related ones. For example, Miguel (8) mentioned that he only wrote at home when he had homework. This shows how home literacy practices are not necessarily self-generated or voluntary. Anita (9) explained to me that she read the Bible every day with her grandmother. Anita did not mention enjoying this, either in the interview or in the home observation. Scarlet's case (10) is very interesting, when I asked her about her preferences in writing something that she likes at home, she mentioned that she enjoyed writing homework as her favorite subject:

Extract 10. Interview with Scarlet (10)

- R: *a ya / y tú pusiste acá [señala el cuestionario] que escribes algunas veces nada más en tu casa / cuando escribes / ¿qué escribes?* (ok / so you wrote here [pointing to the questionnaire] that you only write sometimes at home / so when you write / what do you write about?)
- Scarlet: *yo cuando hago las tareas en el computador las escribo a veces / y después me canso y después empiezo a escribir de nuevo* (sometimes I do the homework on the computer / but then I get tired / and then I start writing again)
- R: *ya / y escribes algo que a ti te guste escribir?* (ok / and do you write anything you enjoy?)
- Scarlet: *a mí a veces me dan tareas en ciencias* (sometimes I have homework for science)
- R: *a / ya* (a / ok)
- Scarlet: *de taller / y esas siempre las hago sin parar* (for the science workshop / and I always do that homework without stopping)
- R: *y ese ramo te gusta entonces* (so you enjoy that subject then)
- Scarlet: *si / es de taller* (yes / it is a workshop)

However, later in the interview, I asked whether she kept a diary and she mentioned that she did and wrote in it almost every day. Scarlet also mentioned that she copied songs by her favorite singers, but only at the end of the interview. After I mentioned different types of writing, she was able to acknowledge these practices as worth mentioning. When I first asked, she only mentioned school-related practices. In a similar way, Luis (10) also mentioned at first that he only wrote at home for things related to homework, but then when I specified that Facebook was also considered writing, he then acknowledged that he did some writing voluntarily:

Extract 11. Interview with Luis (10)

- R: *a que bueno / que bien y cuando escribes / qué tipo de cosas escribes? / escribes algo en tu casa o no?* (a that's good / and when you write / what do you write? / do you write anything at home or not?)
- Luis: *cundo la caligrafía y cosas así* (handwriting worksheets and stuff like that)
- R: *ya / y alguna otra cosa? / por ejemplo escribir así como un diario* (ok / anything else? / for

|       |                                                                                                                                |
|-------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|       | example like a diary)                                                                                                          |
| Luis: | <i>cuando tengo que hacer tareas</i> (when I have to do homework)                                                              |
| R:    | <i>a / ya / cuando haces tareas</i> (ok / when you do your homework)                                                           |
| Luis: | <i>si</i> (yes)                                                                                                                |
| R:    | <i>y por ejemplo en Facebook / escribes algo o no?</i> (and for example on Facebook / do you write or not?)                    |
| Luis: | <i>si / mando mensajes a amigos</i> (yes / I send messages to my friends)                                                      |
| R:    | <i>y el celular? / lo usas para mandar mensajes de texto?</i> (and on a mobile phone? / do you use one to send text messages?) |
| Luis: | <i>algunas veces</i> (sometimes)                                                                                               |

Although writing on Facebook is a self-generated writing practice, Luis only occasionally has a computer available at home as he can only access the Internet from a café or the school library. This practice is also affected by other constraints such as taking care of his younger brother every day.

## 5. Discussion

This article set out to understand how children in disadvantaged contexts perceived their relationships with literacy in general by accessing their voices and practices. These relationships emerged in the social-cultural niches that were influenced by the perceptions held by their parents and teachers. Contrary to what might have been expected according to previous research (e.g. Rubie-Davies, 2006), many of these children perceived themselves somewhat differently from the constructions of their parents and teachers. This discrepancy reveals that some of them could create spaces to overcome more traditional conceptions of literacy, as represented in the teachers' and parents' valuing of academic achievement. However, approximately half of the children (7 out of 13 in School A, 3 out of 7 in School B) aligned more precisely with their elders' opinions of them.

As for the practices, it was especially interesting to find voluntary writing practices along with these schooled practices in all the children. In term of situations, it is relevant to note the presence of very clear *literacy-scaffolding situations* involving siblings and peers (as reflected in extracts 3 and 4). These events proved the value of giving the children's space to contribute to their peers and theirs learning.

The analysis shows how school and home resources are related to children's practices and affected their literacy practices. Nevertheless, the resources did not always determine such practices. Fewer resources were found in School B's children's homes. The lack of traditional resources in School B played an important role, given that I also found fewer literacy practices at home. The analysis shows how both school and home resources are related to children's practices. Furthermore, the events I observed at home showed how the resources the children had related to the ways in which they used literacy. However, for both schools, the resources do not always determine practices. This was very clear in relation to digital resources, since despite not having computers at home, the pupils were very interested in, and tried to engage with, technology. As Kalman (2005) mentions, the availability (i.e. physical presence) of resources does not determine the access to them (i.e. the opportunities for learning to read and write). Therefore, the participants' context emerged as crucial to express the participants' beliefs about literacy. The discourses that portrayed the participants' context as disadvantaged influenced their own perceptions by focusing on the lack of resources.

Both schools showed a wide variety and frequency of practices despite their differences in respect of their sociocultural characteristics. Although School A did proved to have higher frequency, it was especially interesting to find self-generated writing practices in both schools. In addition, these results show no clear difference between the two different school groups in terms of the influence of schooling practices on the children's conceptualization of literacy. Although in School B the pupils were more familiar with practices oriented towards reading and writing, their conceptualization of literacy was similar to the one presented in School A: the children perceive their relationship with literacy in general on the basis of a functional approach to literacy. Therefore, the pupils looked at their relationship with literacy by looking mainly at their performance at school instead of also including a broader conceptualization that considered their self-generated literacy practices.

## 6. Conclusion

Throughout this article, I set out to answer how 7- to 10-year-old children of Puente Alto and Renca draw on understandings of literacy gained from home and school contexts. The results and discussion presented showed that the school context had a great impact on their understanding of literacy. As for the practices, at home the children tried to replicate the school environment when doing their homework, but also found space to other self-generated/voluntary practices.

These findings proved that the pupils had a wide range of practices that involved literacy at home. For this study, a more productive distinction relates to the difference between self-generated practices and practices associated with school requirements. I have highlighted the occurrences of these practices to challenge current notions about the

Chilean environment in disadvantaged communities. According to previous studies, home literacy practices tend to be very restricted and emergent literacy practices outside formal education are very difficult to access (Strasser & Lissi, 2009). However, this study has shown that children's practices are broad and occur quite regularly in the children's routines.

These self-generated practices are relevant because they carry the children's understanding and knowledge of literacy in other domains and the possibility of using this knowledge to enhance their capabilities in literacy. As González, Moll and Amanti explain (2005), understanding children's context and background offers an opportunity to include these differences in the classroom. Furthermore, the current tendency in international policies to promote education among young people and adults considers the context where the students live and the background knowledge they have (Kalman, 2004).

Acknowledging children's agency regarding their learning processes means that they can use their self-generated learning and literacy practices to support their school requirements. Furthermore, an empowering literacy education entails acknowledging the 'linguistic, social and cultural resources learners bring to the classroom' (Burnett, Davies, Merchant & Rowsell, 2014, p. 161). On the other hand, a functional approach to literacy implies that it is an expert domain that requires expert knowledge. The pupils do not feel they are experts in this territory as they are in other domains of their lives. For example, when I asked the children about their play, they considered themselves to be experts and were able to articulate this practice from a perspective that entailed expert knowledge. In this sense, by broadening their conceptualization of literacy, the children could perceive themselves as experts and value their practices, which in turn would build empowerment. Particularly, the empowerment of children coming from a disadvantaged background would give them more opportunities to support their learning (Calderón, 2014). Considering the participants of this study, traditional literacy resources were limited. Therefore, this study aimed to contribute to the promotion of children's own household capital in the development of their writing. When they were aware of the relevance of their own perceptions and practices, the pupils could gain in confidence and be agents of their learning processes.

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