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To read, you need to write. An interview with Francisco Cajiao

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Interview conducted by Diana Sagástegui Rodríguez*



Francisco Cajiao holds a Bachelor's Degree in Philosophy from Universidad Javeriana and a Master's Degree in Economy from the University of the Andes. In the last 25 years he has been an elementary and middle school teacher as well as a university professor and the Dean of the Universidad Distrital and the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional. He was also the head of Bogotá's Administrative Department of Social Welfare. He was an advisor to the United Nations in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Mozambique, and Rome. He has also been an advisor to the UNESCO in Peru and to the CAF for the countries in the Andes region. He headed the educational Division of the FES Foundation, where he helped develop major educational research and development projects such as *Atlántida*, *Nautilus*, and *Pléyade*. He was also advisor to the COLCIENCIAS for the Program ONDAS de ciencia y tecnología, the Minister for Education in Bogotá (2005- 2007), and the Dean of the CAFAM University (2012-2018). He is a permanent member of the Colombian Academy of Pedagogy and Education, and currently serves as advisor to Colombia's Ministry of Education. Francisco Cajiao has done a vast amount of research into education. Besides writing a permanent column for *El Tiempo*, he has published many papers in major journals as well as the books *Poder y Justicia en la Escuela Colombiana*, *Pedagogía de las Ciencias Sociales*, *Las fronteras de la normalidad*, *La Piel del Alma*, *La formación de maestros y su impacto social* and *Instrumentos para escribir el mundo*. His most recent publication is *La identidad de los maestros frente al cambio social*.

Reading is nothing but a human way to inhabit the world [...]. You may be illiterate in the traditional meaning of the word and "read" without hesitation the name of the brand on a milk container or a bicycle, tell a Sony TV from a Samsung one... A little time under the visual influence of ads on walls, packaging of products, radio jingles

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and television video clips suffices to turn anyone into a skillful reader [...]. Human wealth and poverty are closely linked to a greater or lesser need to read and write. Poorer people have little need to read, since the worlds they live in require fewer words to be inhabited: perhaps the names and brands of products, bus routes, street names...

Francisco Cajiao¹

Books and reading are essential components of cultural and political agendas because they are continuously associated to the social, economic, and democratic development of peoples and countries. A clear example is the fact that this is the Ibero-American Year of the Library, whose motto is “Libraries that Create Futures” (*Bibliotecas que crean futuros*).² In Mexico, among other major historical events in our country’s history, in 2021 we celebrate the first century of the creation of Mexico’s Ministry of Public Education or SEP (Secretaría de Educación Pública),³ which since its creation has aimed to foster an increase in the number of affordable publications available to all of Mexico’s population.

Throughout this century SEP has struggled not only to achieve full literacy in Mexico but also to make reading an everyday cultural practice in the life of all Mexicans. To this end there have been, in collaboration with other government agencies and associations, a great number of programs aimed at fostering reading, consolidating a tradition that has taken deep root and borne unquestionable fruit even though important challenges still remain.⁴

The strategies followed by other Latin American countries in this matter seem to run in similar directions. This was the focus of my interview in March 2021 with Francisco Cajiao Restrepo (Bogotá, 1947), a passionate researcher of reading and writing practices and a steadfast supporter of programs to foster them both inside and outside school environments. We began our conversation by inquiring into some conclusions that might be drawn from the experience in his own country.

1 Cajiao, F. (2005). *Instrumentos para escribir el mundo. Lectura, escritura y política en el universo escolar*. Bogotá: Editorial Magisterio, 38-40.

2 Statement made at the 20th Ibero-American Conference of Ministers of Culture held in Bogotá, Colombia, on October 17 to 18 2019.

3 The SEP was created on October 3 1921.

4 One of them is the persistence of illiteracy. The *Census of Population and Housing 2020* (INEGI, 2021) indicated that 4.7 % of Mexico’s population is illiterate (defined as being 15 or older and unable to read or take a written note), which amounts to 4,456,431 people (5.5% of females, 3.9% of males, most of them located in states with the highest levels of marginality – Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero – and especially senior citizens, indigenous people, or people with some kind of disability. Also worrisome is poor performance in reading comprehension. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened this problem: the Survey of the *Impact of COVID-19 on Education* (ECOVIED-ED) 2020, (INEGI, 2021) shows that 33.6 million people between the ages of 3 and 29 were enrolled in the 2019- 2020 school year (62.0% of the total). Of these, 740,000 (2.2%) did not finish the school year: 58.9% of them for some reason associated to COVID-19 and 8.9% due to lack of money or resources. It also shows that 5.2 million (9.6% of the total aged 3 to 29) did not enroll in the 2020-2021 school year for reasons associated to COVID-19 or due to lack of money or resources. The reasons were different: 26.6% believed that online classes were not conducive to learning, 25.3% said that one of their parents became unemployed, 21.9% did not have a computer, other devices, or a connection to internet.

Francisco Cajiao: For many years, a great effort has been made in Colombia through a number of programs, some even inspired by experiences in México, as well as others designed to manage specific situations. I would even venture that so far there have been no significant differences in our results from those in other Latin American countries. And this is because reading has very deep cultural roots, as well as a specific schooling process. In the case of Colombia, there was a serious lag in educational coverage and quality compared to other Latin American countries. Due to very complex historical and political reasons, Colombia's development in this respect lagged far behind that of Argentina or Uruguay: until the first half of the twentieth century, it was closer to the levels of Mexico or Chile. It was not until the 1980s 1990s that this lag was addressed, giving special priority to elementary education and later, with the 1991 reform to the Constitution, making education up to the ninth level compulsory. New programs to foster reading and writing were created, more school libraries were opened, and reading campaigns supported by local governments began in larger cities like Bogotá, Medellín, and Barranquilla. Some positive results have been identified in later surveys, albeit with significant demographic segmentations. Towards the years 2005-2006 surveys show that children began to consume more reading materials than adults did. In the case of Bogotá, this was mainly due to two reasons. One of them was the construction of large public libraries in working class neighborhoods of the city. These libraries also began to incorporate other elements in video and audio formats, following the example of major libraries in the world that feature not only book collections but also different ways to maintain cultural memory. The other reason was the development of strategies to encourage children to read. One of them, *Libro al Viento*, gave children access to small-format, low-cost books that were distributed to schools monthly so that the children could also exchange them. The books were intended for the children to build a collection, not for a specific school library. In Bogotá, these books were taken to the public transport so that in the stations of the *Transmilenio* public transport system people could take them to read in their trip and leave in any station after having read them. This led to a large-scale circulation of short texts by great authors, a first exposure to the world's greatest literature for many, as well as its return to classrooms. There were other initiatives: in Medellín, several civil organizations were created then and are still functioning, as well as reading clubs and nationwide conferences. Although these strategies do bring children closer to reading, there have been no significant effects on total figures: adults still read very little, at least where books are concerned. In the last 10 years, the population in general has gone from reading 1.9 books a year to 2.5. Of course, when one compares different age groups and social levels, there is a lot of variation. What we must keep in mind is that in recent years reading has moved on to mobile devices. Children and young adults are constantly reading the messages they send each other or what people that they "follow" write. Social networks are also permanent networks of reading and writing, with an added spectrum of audiovisual contents in images and video. Online films, television, and

programs convey huge amounts of information at a speed that makes it difficult to develop critical reading skills. Although we must recognize that – despite a few good experiences that must be built upon – there has been no great progress regarding conventional reading, other reading and writing platforms where knowledge is also generated are taking the lead. Unfortunately, schools have so far remained oblivious to these developments.

DSR: How can we imagine the school taking a lead position vis-a-vis these dynamics of cultural consumption?

Francisco Cajiao: Well, the school must take a look at itself and figure out how it can offer tools to help students understand the world in which they live, not the one that has already gone by. It must not only ponder the importance of these ways of developing and circulating materials and information, but also reveal how they work and help to understand their grammar, their syntax. Because – as unfortunately a great number of cases have shown – they are at the same time means to learn and also to misinform about different and important issues. An example of this has been the explanations that have been circulated about the COVID-19 pandemic, which include true as well as false data, speculations, and outright lies. We may wonder what is being done at school, and whether teachers are aware of and taking action about these reading and writing contents and models that are being shared. Rather, what actually happens is that at school these materials and information are fought against by forbidding the use of mobile phones, or not letting students consult and evaluate the validity of some sources. Doing this is easier than incorporating these dynamics into an educational model that takes into account such reading and writing practices. This has become even more evident in the current situation of the pandemic, even though there was an apparently radical shift by relying on electronic media to keep classes going. Neither teachers nor students made any major change: the ways in which electronic media were used were restricted mostly to the most direct communicative interaction about specific school contents. So far, it remains unclear how the dilemmas raised by new reading and writing practices are being incorporated into actual school work.

DSR: Could we surmise that teachers, students, and those in charge of school guidelines and even public policies on education may feel powerless when faced with the power of digital networks or platforms? That they may understand increasingly better the rationale of these means of communication, governed by the business models of major technological corporations, the pernicious influence of algorithms that decide what information reaches each person in a sometimes biased way, but that at the same time find it almost impossible to match these powerful mechanisms to their educational school processes, which are also constrained by limited margins of action?

Francisco Cajiao: This tension is undoubtedly a major cultural issue. But the same thing happens with the printed word. Publishers may publish texts of different quality, and people may read self-help books or Shakespeare, have access to carelessly edited books or to sublime works. So what really matters is not what is available to read but the ability to discern, to choose. And it is precisely this critical skill that consists of assigning a value to what one wishes to consume. The school is definitely not able to influence what information circulates in the digital communication networks and how it circulates, but it can offer an education to develop a taste, to put it in aesthetic terms. But also to develop judgment. Young people may log in to, say, YouTube, to search for and find information of very different relevance and quality. What, then, do their searches depend on? If the school cannot provide this enchantment to make students find pleasure in the things that enrich their imagination, this won't happen through campaigns that promote traditional reading practices, for which no country has enough money anyway. It is a day-to-day task in which the school has to play a central role. The key question that we must ask ourselves here – and which I asked myself when I was the Minister for Education – is about what the teachers actually read. We often find that they are not exactly passionate readers. They have to work long hours, teach class after class, and then continue working at home to check and grade papers and homework. These are not ideal conditions for an active cultural life that allows them to incorporate some elements of cultural consumption into their teaching to encourage this taste in their students and guide them in their search for information based on more solid criteria.

DSR: This leads us to the specific qualities of reading and writing required in schools to generate particular types of knowledge. Nowadays, at least in the case of elementary education, the most common search engine used is often Google, whose algorithms, as we know, operate mostly under the sign of profits. In my research into middle high education in Jalisco, Mexico, I found that regardless of the subjects studied, the types and location of schools, or the socio-economic level of the students, they follow criteria marked by a reading protocol we might generically label as “school-like”: when they study and do homework, students look for information that coincides with what they saw in class, with what their teachers specifically asked them, or with their academic subjects’ programs. Thus, they perform a sort of “domestication” of the abundant and diverse information available online, and the school’s library or printed books are used less and less.

Francisco Cajiao: We must examine very important, fundamental, cultural changes that have taken place one after the other and that have transformed the context of reading. We have always needed to decipher signs, since that ability to generate meaning is what makes us human. In order to do that we have to use languages which are different according to very different

contents; for instance, the language of mathematics, with very specific features. We must also consider the space dimension: more people live now in cities, where living spaces have become increasingly smaller, just a few square meters. People who are my age, with larger personal libraries, cannot easily move to other spaces, and younger generations will find it more difficult to enjoy the space required by a home library. Reading on a 'tablet' is different from reading a printed book. In ancient Rome, if you wanted to read you had to go to a large building and be able to read Latin. What matters here is which meanings we are originating and exchanging, which knowledge we are generating, which world we are writing. Of course, all current knowledge in the world goes through reading and writing. All the audiovisual materials with which we are interacting go first through reading and writing. All films require a written screenplay, which must then be read by directors, actors and those in charge of different artistic and technical aspects in order to translate it into an audiovisual language. When we use GPS systems, we read directions and maps differently from the way we used to in the past. It is a permanent interplay between signs and meanings. Thus, in order not to have the teacher decide for me, in order not to have Google decide for me, to read a newspaper without someone else deciding for me, I must first develop my own judgment, take some distance, and read between the lines. Moreover, you cannot do that if you do not know how a newspaper is written. If the school wants to teach how to write a newspaper, it will have to make one. That's why my thesis is that if you want to learn how to read, you must first learn how to write. You must explore the different kinds of keys that make it possible to say what I want to say. Without taking the story of the chicken and the egg too literally, writing undoubtedly precedes reading. We read what has been written. On the other hand, we must take into account that those who write have greater power than those who only read. Consider the writing of laws, or of sacred books figuratively dictated by a god. The same thing happens in politics taken as knowledge in general: the authorship of a recognized text is also a form of authority. Reading is not only deciphering signs, but a form of social relationship that also opens ways to generate new meanings, which may be imposed on people or open the way to new constellations of knowledge, as is the case of science.

DSR: Without a doubt, all modes of reading and writing create social links, civilization, written culture. However, we are witnessing a major shift with the current excess of information, the multiple and sometimes not very ethical strategies to win the battle for the attention of readers in communicative environments, the mutations in the forms of authorship, classification, and recognition of the written word, the possibility of an almost infinite intertextuality. Are we facing a possible atomization of the ability to produce shared meanings, at least within an identifiable interpretive community?

Francisco Cajiao: This places us inside the wider universe of culture and different temporalities. I remember that four or five years ago there was an exhibition in Rome of a Renaissance

painter whose works had not been appreciated and catalogued until the nineteenth century. In the world of films, film masterpieces may be box office flops, with very few viewers. In the field of science, there are many examples of people who have made great contributions and been recognized – if ever – many years later. On the other hand, at present, so-called “influencers” set socialization and cultural consumption trends, provided that they are continuously updated. In politics, success does not always depend on the most solid proposals but in those more in tune with what people want to hear at a given moment, and in cases like Donald Trump’s election, may endanger the whole planet. The dilemma of how to discern among different proposals in different areas can only be solved by an education that enables people to distinguish among them. But the most thriving sources of meaning depend on many factors, which is a cause for concern. If we compare the time it takes for something to become viral to the time it took for Dostoevski’s works, written by hand with pens dipped in ink, to become known, we are talking about a process that took years to produce and circulate a literary work. Publication is faster now and the demand for low quality, self-help, esoteric books may lead the market. The issue here is what the public looks for, which requirements for knowledge are appreciated and satisfied, and to which frameworks of meaning readers want to affiliate.

DSR: One often hears the argument of functionality in reading and writing practices, which portrays them as a desirable goal in themselves. One hears, for example, that reading works that only seek to entertain – such as best sellers about zombies, wizards, etc. – have helped young people develop a taste for reading. A shift in the offer of the publishing industry that justifies its trend to publish short, recreational works has been documented. Does this lead us to rethink the “why to read” nowadays?

Francisco Cajiao: If you ask me why we should read, in human terms it is like asking why we should breathe. If you don’t read, it is not possible to integrate yourself into a social tissue that is fundamentally made of written culture. But the question makes sense, and it can be answered with some nuances. What are the reasons for reading a novel, if our lives are after all walking novels, because all kinds of things happen to us? Ernesto Sábato said that the whole of Latin America’s philosophy is in our novels. Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez or Jorge Luis Borges, for instance, showed how people in our countries signified the world. We could also cite indigenous or female writers who show a worldview that is unique to them. And we should also encourage young people, teenagers, to read. Reading enables us to interpret the world and feel empathy for others, whether similar to or different from us. Reading to learn social science allows us to understand why we are the way we are, what causes poverty, social exclusion, and the progressive concentration of power and wealth worldwide, to name a few. And we could also mention other fields of knowledge, all of them invaluable intellectual instruments. In Co-

lombia, the program *Ondas de Ciencia y Tecnología*, which began twenty years ago and where I had the privilege of participating, aimed to teach children and teenagers to develop research projects and provide funding for them. Today, there are more than 35,000 research groups with students between the ages of 5 and 18. Many vocations have emerged from them, as well as careers of renowned researchers today. But most of all the program has been a space of freedom for reading and writing centered on the autonomy of people to decide their own interests, articulating them with their passion for knowledge, for understanding the world. Schools need to work in this direction.

We concluded this interview with important certainties. Institutional actions and strategies aimed at making reading and writing a part of everyday life need to be designed with a full acknowledgement of the fact that it is crucial that they encourage, by means of literacy⁵ practices, the individual's capacity of agency to discern and participate in their own world. This possibility underscores the character of sociocultural practice of both vernacular practices that allow individuals to be functional in concrete environments and of those conducted strictly for the pleasure derived from reading, as well as those that focus on the mastery of academic, artistic, or disciplinary contents.

Schools play a key role to achieve this fundamental aim, insofar as their educational goals seek to develop cognitive skills and social interaction competencies. But this is also because of the determining role of school literacy as a valid or desirable model, because of its closeness to scientific regimes and the classical canons of literate culture⁶. School contents traditionally present demands of discourse coherence, thematic progression and inferential derivations characteristic of scientific culture, often regarded as superior to popular culture. However, other literacy

5 In Spanish I use the word '*literacidad*' to refer to a number of concrete and situated social practices associated to reading and writing, inscribed in specific social contexts, and whose modalities and consequences are defined in conjunction with a broad set of political, economic, and social factors, including the culture of the group referred to: Street, B. (1984) *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge University Press. Judith Kalman warns about the inconvenience of using this neologism, whose use is nevertheless required due to the inadequacy of meaning of the usual translation of 'literacy' as '*alfabetismo*'; too close to '*alfabetización*', which generally denotes an individual conception of the acquisition and use of graphic conventions and the negative implications associated to it, obviating the fact that literacy implies "learning to participate in social activities or communicative events where writing is used, that is, learning to speak about its form and use, understanding the meaning of the event, demonstrating relevant and socially valued knowledge, as well as producing and manipulating writing and its conventions": Kalman, J. (1993). En búsqueda de una palabra nueva: la complejidad conceptual y las dimensiones sociales de la alfabetización. *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios Educativos* XXIII (1), 87-95.

6 The trend towards associating all kinds of literacy to the school implies regarding this type as the model to be followed, a gradual blurring of the boundaries between different types of literacies and the devaluation of other models different from it: (Mauger, 2004) El retroceso de la lectura. Cuatro hipótesis. In Lahire, B. (comp.), *Sociología de la lectura*. Barcelona: Gedisa. In Spanish I use '*escolarización*' to refer to the gradual association of different literate practices to the institutionalized educational notions of teaching and learning: Street, B; J. Street (2004). La escolarización de la literacidad. In Zavala, V.; M. Niño-Murcia; P. Ames (eds.) (2004). *Escritura y sociedad. Nuevas perspectivas teóricas y etnográficas*. Peru: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú/Universidad del Pacífico.

phenomena move in the opposite direction: disintegration, brevity, fragmentation, abundance and haste associated to current online reading and writing practices, governed by corporate business models that make disinformation and the option of “no information” a profitable commodity, are part of young people’s literate practices,⁷ even disrupting traditional school literacy figures. Such modalities diversify the way students search and process information, interpret data, and (re)create universes of meaning and action. These reading and writing practices take place in unregulated information markets and are destined not only to start fleeting socialization, consumption and creativity processes through mobile technological devices, but also to participate in the exercise of citizenship,⁸ the generation of emotions, the construction of identities, subjectivities and knowledge shared and regarded as valid⁹. Such a scenario poses significant challenges for educational institutions, especially in regard to the training processes of teachers whose working conditions have also been affected by the COVID- 19 pandemic, which has forced them to make intensive use of digital technologies in literacy practices.

Finally, regarding the plans and programs to foster reading among the general population, some questions about the horizon of short and middle term expectations still remain unanswered. Is it desirable to redraw the strategies used until now to leverage their capacity and pertinence in the current social context? Will these strategies opt for taking on a more involved role to promote reading – and, hopefully, writing – practices as vectors for participation and social agency, and not only to make it easier to access some materials? Such a shift might seem difficult; however, the need to adopt strategies to foster reading and writing articulated with the expectations, purposes, searches, customs, values and cultural norms of those who now see themselves as only the “beneficiaries” of the strategies is increasingly becoming more evident. To this effect, qualitative empirical research on reading and writing practices conducted in specific communities and contexts allows us to better understand them. The knowledge obtained through such research is essential to dismantle the still persistent “myth of reading” that presents it in a simplified manner, as a predetermined spectrum of skills independent from the context, as a personal and social improvement lever (Graff, 2010).¹⁰ Undoubtedly, by subverting an individualistic and out-of-context view of literacy we are also questioning arbitrary hierarchical distinctions that still prevail about certain competencies, contents, and formats, which frequently lead to abusive cultural homologation processes that are generally socially asymmetrical, and sometimes merely discriminatory.

7 Cf. Boyadjian, J. (2021). ¿Desinformación, no información o sobreinformación? Las lógicas de exposición a la actualidad en los entornos estudiantiles. *Réseaux*, (0). <https://doi.org/10.3917/res.222.0021>

8 García Canclini, N. (2019). *Ciudadanos reemplazados por algoritmos*. Germany: Universidad de Guadalajara / CALAS Maria Sybilla Merian Center.

9 Salient in this respect are issues associated to so-called *post-truth*, a certain degree of indifference towards facts in favor of feelings and emotions in the processes of social production of knowledge. Cf. Kempner, J. (2020) Post-truth and the production of ignorance. *Sociological Forum*, 35(1), 234-240. Zembylas, M. (2020) The affective grounding of post-truth: pedagogical risks and transformative possibilities in countering post-truth claims. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 28(1), 77-92.

10 Graff, H. J. (2010). The Literacy Myth at Thirty. *Journal of Social History*, 43(3), 635-661.

Educators will fulfill a decisive role in broadening the possibilities for change and continuing, in a dialog with other fields of knowledge, to reflect collectively on the paradigms that underlie and guide the socio-cultural productions of literacy. And if, as has been argued, it is through reading and writing practices that individuals and communities knit together the never-ending interweaving of communication, power relationships, and the exercise of rights and social justice in our societies, programs aimed at fostering them must account for this.