

The Mandarache Guide: books and youth engagement

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Methodological guide to implement the Mandarache model in municipalities



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Introduction

An outsider's voice

When I accepted the offer to write this document, I had no idea of the challenges I would face. First, I observed behind the scenes of the Mandarache and Hache Awards, one of the most important examples in the field of reading mediation with young people in Spain. Second, I analyzed how the project promotes civic engagement in youth through literary education. Third, I understood the discrete way in which these awards build their identity through solid itineraries and community work networks. After these three steps, the hard part began: writing a methodological guide. I had to digest, translate and articulate a set of tools for those who, like me, had seen the project develop and wanted to carry out similar activities but with different resources. In other words, I had to write a step-by-step guide on how to effectively and economically implement your own projects.

I write in the first person to establish a closer relationship with the reader. However, the project is about many individuals working simultaneously. The voices of the young people in the community are mixed with those of the teachers, the different cultural agents and the workers of the Concejalía de Juventud (Youth Department of the City of Cartagena). So who would be the "I" when this award speaks of a "we"?



That is why I preferred to present myself as an outsider, as a spy who observes meticulously. I interviewed other witnesses, researched the various procedures, and analyzed how the project worked. The aim of this guide is not only to explain the technical aspects of the Mandarache and Hache Awards, but also to offer other entities, communities and groups the possibility to find motivation to carry out their own projects. The Mandarache Guide, more than an example, is a compilation of replicable techniques to bring together literature, cultural networks and young people in a great celebration around books where everyone is welcome.



Why write the Mandarache Guide?

In 2025, after 20 years of constant development, the Mandarache Award has gradually become a reading mediation project of great importance at the national level. It was an idea that, with the constant support of community networks, sought to address some of the major deficiencies in its environment. In 2004, when the project began, an activity aimed at engaging with the young population was planned. The aim was to improve reading habits and intervene in the early school leaving rate. Data show that in the Region of Murcia in 2004, the number of early school leavers was over 40%, the academic failure rate in compulsory higher education was 35% and the employment rate in people between 16 and 19 years of age was 32.2%.¹

Patricio Hernández, who at the time was the coordinator of the Concejalía de Juventud, was inspired by national initiatives such as the Archbishop Xoán de San Clemente Prize and other international examples such as the Premio Napoli or the Prix Goncourt des Lycéens. After studying these projects, their methodologies and their ways of achieving active youth engagement in the world of books, what we know today as the Mandarache and Hache Awards began to take shape.

¹. Data on early school leaving in the EU and public spending on education in the OECD.

The original idea was to reassure young people about their own points of view on the selection of books. The project wanted to take into account the perspective of those who read and integrate it in a proposal for literary conversation in Cartagena. Moreover, the idea was to create intergenerational links between different cultural and educational agents of the community and to weld together each of the layers that influence the shared reading and the development of intellectual and personal itineraries during adolescence. **Thus, is how a jury for a literary award in Spanish was born, made up of young people between 15 and 30 years old, who formed committees to evaluate the participating books. The aim was to give them a share of civic power through reading literature, in a society that rarely gives them a leading role.** The Ayuntamiento de Cartagena (Cartagena City Council) supported the creation of this huge literary jury by providing the meeting spaces and the books free of charge. They also invested in the creation of spaces for education and dialogue between teachers, young people, library staff and, in general, people from the professional world of books: bookstores, publishers, authors and other agents who helped and participated in the various processes and activities.

However, the institutional support of the public administration alone would not have been enough without the unconditional commitment of the citizens' assembly, which became the main force behind the project. This group, now called Grupo Promotor (Promoter Group), is the key to the success of all the mediation activities aimed at the young population. It is mainly made up of teachers and librarians. During the first years of the project, following the advice of bookseller Ana Escarabajal, they created a network in which each community agent became essential in the open dialogue between the young population and literature.

Providing this genealogical data is not a random choice. On the contrary, the idea of creating this methodological guide came from the way Mandarache was born, by drawing inspiration from similar existing projects. One of the first steps in the creation of Mandarache was to closely observe the development of other exemplary projects, to understand other successful proposals for reading mediation, and to give them the necessary relevance in the project's own identity. One of Mandarache's commitments to the cultural network that inspired and helped create its structure is to offer useful tools for reflection and creation of similar projects, applicable to different contexts.

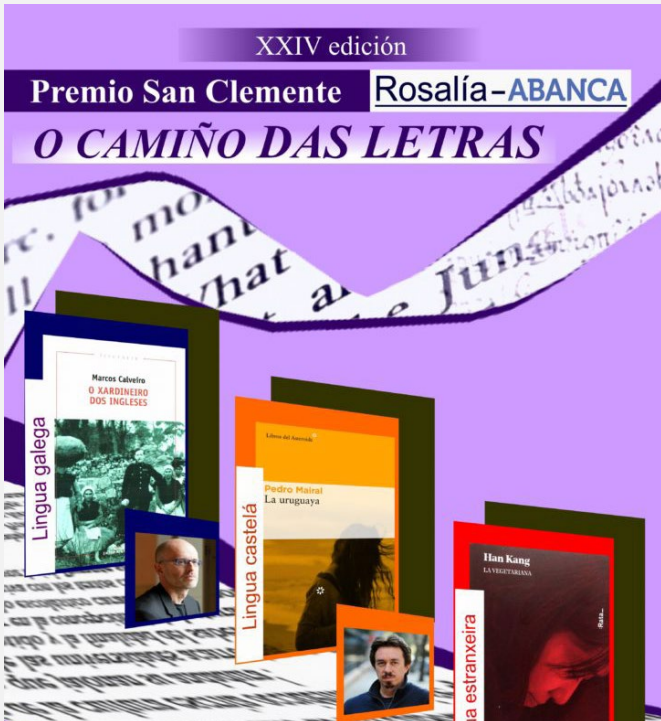
In support of this point, I hope you find the following links useful:



Italian project, created in 1954, in which a popular jury awards literary recognition at the national level.



French project, created in 1988, in which young people choose the winning books at regional and national levels.



Spanish project created in 1993 in Santiago de Compostela, in which different groups of students from Galician high schools vote for a narrative prize.

What is this guide about?

One of the strengths of the Mandarache and Hache Awards is the impact they have had on the reading habits of Cartagena's population, as well as the regional and international impact the project has had. Their ideas are constantly expanding. In 2012, for example, they made it possible for high schools from other municipalities to participate in the reading, be part of the jury, and attend the events. In 2017, the project expanded its horizons and held a pilot initiative with high schools from Cartagena de Indias (Colombia) and Cartagena (Chile) under the name Orillas Mandarache. Nearly 700 Latin American students, along with the thousands of young people in Cartagena (Spain), voted for the winning book. Little by little, the organization wants to lay the groundwork for the jury of the Mandarache Award to become an international jury made up of young people from the three different cities called Cartagena around the world. Its reach lies in the word of mouth among the communities, but also in the sum of the different recognitions it has collected over the years.

In 2014, the Spanish Ministry of Culture awarded Mandarache with the Premio Nacional al Fomento de la Lectura (National Support for Reading Award). This was an important milestone in the development of the project and led other municipalities to follow the progress of the project with curiosity. However, the leaders of the project have always insisted that the strength of the project lies in the plurality of voices involved. It is a community activity in which all actors bring stability and vitality to the project. If one of the knots in the network were to break, all the progress would be lost.

In addition to serving as a guide, this document is intended to provoke questions and provide tools for expanding a project in the context of a global crisis in the humanities. It aims to encourage young people to read, to improve their reading habits and to help them see themselves as active members of their communities, capable of transforming their environment. Not in vain, **the Mandarache project has currently built a solid community of thousands of readers who go beyond being mere consumers to become agents. They participate in the awards and in the various cultural activities that are organized at the request of the participants.** The exploration of what makes Mandarache an effective and impactful project also helps them, through conscious observation, to continuously evaluate and understand the strengths, virtues and areas for improvement, so that the project remains relevant and continues to show care for this exercise of young citizen participation through culture.

In support of this point, I hope you will find the following link useful:

In 2021, the expert consultant David Roselló Cerezuela, director of Nexa Cultura SL., published an impact assessment that proves the influence of the project on the reading habits of Cartagena students, as well as the engagement it has generated in relation to the cultural aspects it offers.

How to use it?

The purpose of this brief introduction to the Mandarache project is to present and highlight the specific requirements that make it a solid model for replication. In this sense, it is important that, in order to use this guide, the person knows the needs and intentions of the project they want to implement.

This document is divided into four steps. Each of these steps has, on the one hand, a theme to reflect on conceptually and on the other hand, each step provides the instructions to develop this project, as long as the context in which the project is to be applied is taken into account. These four steps define the roles played by the community networks, through the mediators and the Grupo Promotor. They also serve as a guide for the members of the cultural and educational community in the sustainable development of the project. The goal is to explore the relationship between young people and reading while also examining the connections between youth and culture. In doing so, establish an effective structure for this project on participation and reading.

These are the names of the four steps in this document:

Step 1: Reading with teenagers and young adults

Step 2: Contexts

Step 3. Timelines

Step 4: Results





In each step, you will find the following resources to help you develop your project.

Trigger questions. Each step begins with a few open-ended questions designed to provoke reflection on the topic at hand. The questions will help users of this guide focus on each of the topics. They will also provide an insightful framework for the initiative and its replicability in different contexts.

Conceptual reflections. Each step is based on a theoretical description that provides the reader with concepts, reflections, and definitions to apply in the development of the project. In some cases, support materials will be provided to allow for further reflection in other areas surrounding the project

TIP

Trust your judgment. Discuss every idea, no matter how small. It could grow into a solid start for a future project. Before you do anything, take the time to learn about the context and community in which you will be implementing the project. An unknown context can weaken a good idea.

Methodologies. Tools for project development, planning, and execution are provided. Methodological ideas go hand in hand with the conceptual reflections.

Testimonies. In order to give this guide a three-dimensional approach, the participants of the project were interviewed including members of the Grupo Promotor, teachers, mediators, participating young people, publishers, family members... Quotes from the interviews are used to illustrate information in the guide.

Tips. Recommendations that may seem obvious or small are important when it comes to implementing a project like this.

Step 1

Reading with teenagers and young adults

1. Reading as a social strategy

In the context of the Mandarache and Hache Awards, reading is a right. Teenagers and young adults, when given the necessary tools to participate in a cultural activity in a committed and critical way, have the chance to build and restructure their personal paths. This exercise of exploration symbolically gives them a sense of freedom. In this sense, the choice of literary reading as the focus of the project is intentional. It is during adolescence that the way they feel in society and the way they see the world acquire different tensions and complexities. Literature offers them a place of recognition. It allows them to approach the world as critical and transformative actors.

Understanding young people's reading habits and how they read is directly linked to understanding the young generations' vision of the future of society. Teresa Colomer says that *“the reading of teenagers is considered a pillar when it comes to educational and commercial mediation and cultural policies”*². This is because, to understand young people and what they read, it is necessary to understand all that they have inherited and how they live the literary and the bookish. It is not a question of reading as an educational obligation, but of discovering, through reading, the different layers of rights that adolescents and young people have.

QUESTIONS

Why should you insist on reading mediation with young people?

What strategies do you usually use to build bridges toward books?

Do you think that reading is changing today?

Literary education in secondary school shows the different ways and connections that have been previously established at the family, school, social, and even political levels. From a social point of view, this means all the ways in which the subjects were able to approach reading. These factors are also influenced by two relevant factors: the publishing and commercial influence in the imagination of young readers; and the digital world as an alternative meeting point, out of reach from the system. Rather than being obstacles, we should see them as two new themes to be considered in a contemporary approach to reading. **The reading habits of young people should be considered from the perspective of education for participation, as a possibility for active participation in the cultural framework of a society.**

2. Colomer, T (ed.). *Lecturas adolescentes [Adolescent readings]*. Barcelona: Graó, 2009, p.109.

In this way we approach the perspective that has been created around literary reading. On the one hand, there is the prejudice that comes from compulsory reading in schools. On the other hand, there is literary reading as a responsible and rewarding space where public policies intervene as motivators. In the Mandarache and Hache Awards, the idea of generational and political impact is seen as an agent of change and progress. Young people read because they can and want to.

In this sense, and as David Roselló Cerezuela explains in his impact assessment: *“the Mandarache and Hache Awards are conceptually based on a triangle with three interconnected vertebrae: culture (reading, libraries...), formal education (schools, faculty...) and personal or non-formal education (personality, cultural centers...)”*. However, in order to build the chains that link these vertebrae and that shape the concept proposed by the Mandarache and Hache Awards, a complementary and strong action is needed. One that allows communication between the different actors that make up the triangle. This is why mediation becomes an essential tool between the young population and the cultural, educational and social network that surrounds them.





2. Alliances between formal education and Concejalía de Juventud policies

Reading mediation agents linked to literary education aim to bridge the gap between books and people, as many people as possible, readers and non-readers alike. In this sense, the Mandarache project aims to have a positive impact on the development of reading habits in the young population. It also supports the role of the teachers in building an independent criterion around their cultural itineraries. The mediation is not only an effort made by the faculty, but is supported by the Concejalía de Juventud through the non-formal education methods that characterize its work, integrating policies that promote the participation and decision-making of young people.

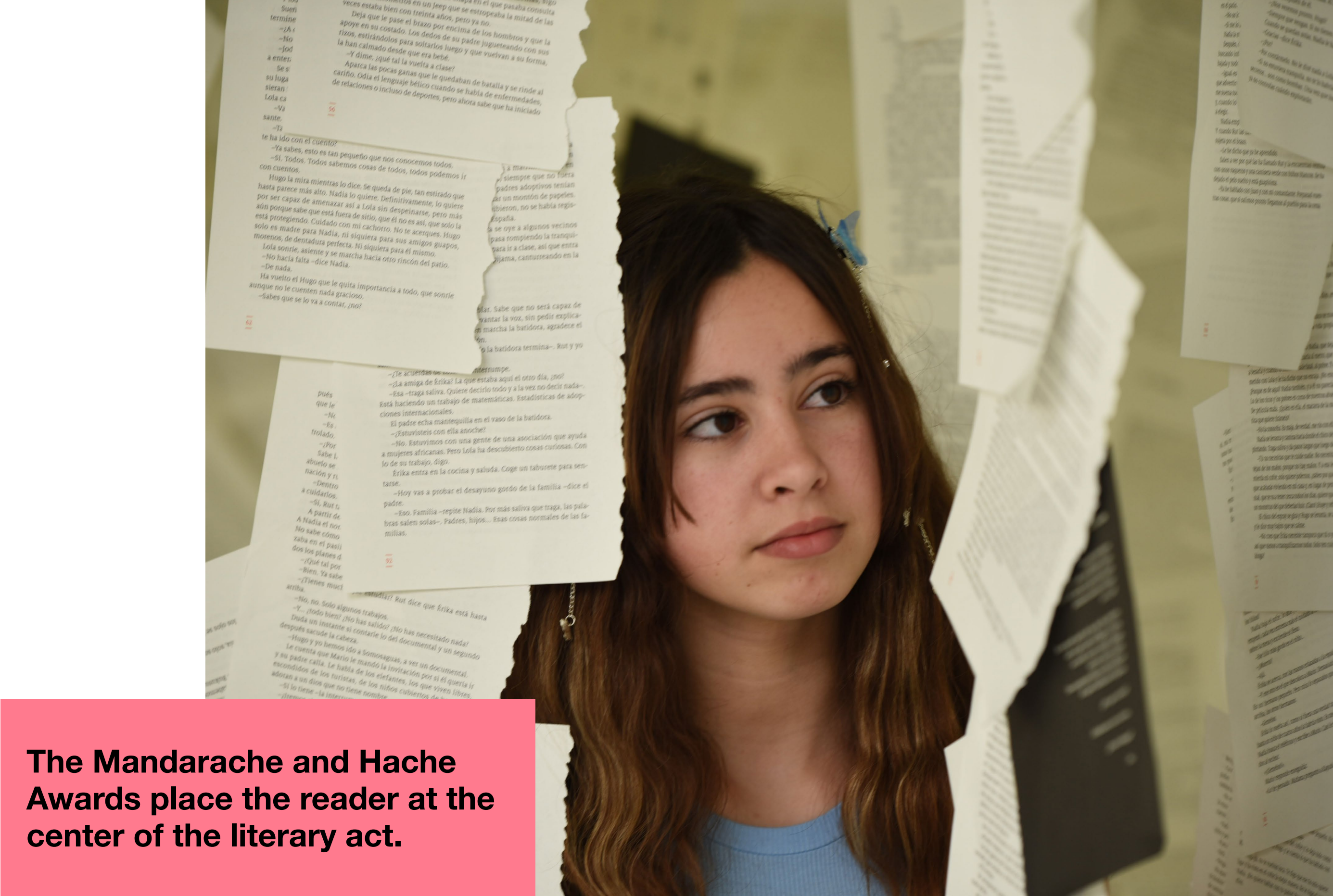
In this sense, the Mandarache and Hache Awards are more a project of education for participation than a project to promote reading.

Its impact is undeniable. To see it, we only need to look at the number of participants: every year, around seven thousand people take part in the awards. To understand its impact, it is important to understand the dynamic that the award proposes. To participate as a jury, young people must form **reading committees** of six people who study, live, work or

were born in the municipality of Cartagena. If you want to participate in the Hache Award, for students between 12 and 14 years old, you need a teacher to be the leader of the group. However, if you want to participate in Mandarache, for people between fifteen and thirty years old, one of the young people must be the coordinator, especially in the case of those reading committees that are not linked to a secondary education center. The committees are citizen participation groups that read three books previously selected by the Grupo Promotor. This part of the process will be explained in detail in later pages of this guide. For now, it is important to focus on the youth and their role as agents.

The young public is responsible for reading, participating, stimulating dialog and selecting the winning book. This means that both the faculty and the Concejalía de Juventud must create a structure in which young people become agents, through a dynamic that involves active decision-making at a social and community level. They are also confronted with a selection of books that are challenging, diverse and unconventional from an educational and commercial point of view. **Although it is a project to promote reading among young people, the books are not only from the field of young adult literature**, but they also aim to diversify the literary prescriptions and broaden the concept of young adult literature.

The Mandarache and Hache Awards place the reader at the center of the literary act. These tools allow young people to re-evaluate their own ideas about society and to reassess the impact that education can have on their lives, thus materializing the best example of mediation. Reading mediation requires analytical tools, literary and reading education, but above all it requires the creation of links and processes of debate.



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Literary education takes place at various levels of the reader's daily life. It takes place at home, at school, in the library, in the community, and online. In order to explore these spaces as mediators, we need to think about the rights of each of the agents, but also about the training of mediators and the appreciation of their work in activating these mechanisms. Access to culture can be a privilege and, as such, can present difficulties for some social nuclei. One of the priorities of this project is to ensure that public policies reduce the gaps in access to culture for young people.

3. Starting from scratch, starting small

In this guide we are talking about big numbers and some of the images shown could be striking in terms of reach: thousands of participants, hundreds of reading committees, dozens of teams of teachers and educational centers, several supporting public administrations, three countries involved... Mandarache is currently in a remarkable state of vitality. However, the size of Mandarache can be overwhelming and discouraging for an initiative that is just beginning to lay its foundations. That is why it is important to point out that these figures are the result of 20 years of development and work on a project in a municipality of 220,000 inhabitants. This guide encourages you to take a closer look at each of the processes described and offers a wide range of possibilities for managing progress in the implementation of your own project, adapted to the characteristics and realities of the city or context in which it is to be implemented.

This is something I will repeat throughout this guide: Mandarache started small and grew like a snowball, slowly but steadily. For example, the first Grupo Promotor did not have more than 8 or 10 people, not more than 5 or 6 teachers. Edition 0 of the project had the participation of only 5 or 6 high schools (and at that time there were more than 20 centers of secondary education in the municipality). In fact, **this is one of the best pieces of advice in this guide: start small and let the projects grow naturally.**



One of the things that seems profoundly obvious, but is not, is the need to be clear about the why of the project. It is important to be clear about the context and what needs to be addressed. Even more so when it comes to the impact on young people. Most of the time, mistakes are made by minimizing reflection on intergenerational issues, which leads to falling into commonplaces or actions based more on prejudices than on data, when the different young populations require close observation and care.

The project was born in 2004 under the name of Mandarache Young Readers' Award. The initiative was proposed by the Concejalía de Juventud of the Ayuntamiento de Cartagena. It was a small, local idea that aimed to change the context of participation of young people in the territory through reading and culture. The group meetings of what is now the Grupo Promotor were the result of trial and error, and at the time they had neither clarity nor structure in the roles they played. They wanted to improve the reading habits of the young population, but in general they wanted to improve their reading skills in order to consolidate their ability to participate in community life, strengthen their critical tools and enrich their vision of life and the world.

The format, inspired by other international projects mentioned at the beginning of this guide, focused on proposing three books that could be read in the classroom with the support of a teacher. It was a surprise for the organization, which had expected 150 to 200 participants for the first edition, when 700 young people from secondary schools signed up. This is not an insignificant number in terms of reading promotion activities for young people.

As the years went by and the project had a greater impact on the community, other allied actors gradually joined the project. In the second edition, the Universidad Politécnica de Cartagena (UPCT) joined the project, and in 2009 the project grew even more with the opening of the Hache Award category. This proposal was able to involve young people between 12 and 14 years of age. In addition, public library clubs and literary workshops from the Polytechnic University of Cartagena and the

Universidad de Mayores de la UPCT (Senior University) were integrated into the Mandarache project. And a few editions later, an associated center of the Spanish National University of Distance Education (UNED), the ISEN University Center and the University of Murcia also joined the project. This means that the larger the project, the greater the impact and interest of the educational and cultural networks of the entity.

As you continue to read this guide, you will see how today the actors of participation are naturally interwoven in the implementation of the different processes. Each of them corresponds to a specific objective, on a procedural and technical level. To reach this level of complexity, you need time to build a solid structure. But there is no structure that will hold its shape without good groundwork, nor without the human team willing to make it happen.

TIP

This guide is meant to be manipulated and transformed. It is not about copying the Mandarache project word for word. On the contrary, your task is to find in this analysis the processes that you can transform for your own proposal. For example, you could create a simple jury without having to think about complementary activities. The need for growth and greater visibility will depend on the progress made in each of the areas that define your project.

Step 2

Contexts

1. Local development

In order to carry out a project at the local level, it is necessary to consider the environment in which the project will be implemented. We recommend that you carry out an in-depth analysis, taking into account all the possible actors that could be involved in the project. In Spain, in most cases, the Concejalía de Juventud of each municipality (a department that oversees the design of different policies and organizes different activities and campaigns for the local youth population) is the one that can provide the necessary institutional link that this type of project needs.

It is true that if you want to award a prize, you need an infrastructure, but first you need to know what your philosophy will be. In this sense, the most important opinion to take into account is that of the target group: young people between the ages of 12 and 30, with special attention to those enrolled in educational centers. To organize a literary award where the jury is made up of people of a certain age, it is necessary to understand the needs of the local group.

To achieve active community participation, the community must feel involved and motivated by the proposal. The organizer must understand the relationship between the local cultural background, the level of educational development in the area, and the interests, motivations, and aspirations of young people in terms of cultural and social development. Another aim is to encourage the development of a sense of self-awareness in relation to the proposals made for them. Overall, getting to



QUESTIONS

Considering your own context, what tools do you have to implement a reading mediation project at the community level?

How accessible are books in your community?

Will different cultural experts select books for the project in advance?

How much will the book industry be involved in the mediation project?



know the young people you are planning to work with will allow you to have a better knowledge of their background so that they can be at the center of the project.

Therefore, it is necessary to consider the target population as the focus of the project.

In Spain, the population between the ages of 10 and 15 are considered adolescents, and those between the ages of 15 and 30 are considered young people³. Institutions like Concejalías de Juventud design and focus their project mainly on this population, this is their target group. In 2004, the Mandarache Award was created for this age group, but a few years later it was deemed necessary to include young people between the ages of 11 and 12 as they begin their secondary education. This is how the Hache Youth Literature Award was born in 2009. It is aimed at the adolescent population and, in my opinion, it is a crucial link for literary education between childhood and adolescence.

This creates an arc from the young adult fiction readings of the Hache Award to the more popular, diverse, and even complex readings that characterize the Mandarache Award, allowing the young population to broaden their horizons.

To achieve this, it is necessary to consider the educational level of the target group. For this, it would be optimal to have theoretical frameworks and studies (that provide data and reading comprehension percentages) on the relationship between the age-limited population

3. In the reports of the Spanish Youth Institute (INJUVE), the age range used to define the youth population is between 15 and 29 years. These are the same age groups that make up the study population of the International Youth Organization for Ibero-America (OIJ). However, the United Nations (UN) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) consider the youth population to be between 15 and 24 years old.

and their educational context. Conducting one's own research without the necessary economic resources is probably not an option. Therefore, support from schools and teachers is essential. They have the knowledge and experience as they are in direct contact with their students. Also, starting a project similar to Mandarache is likely to provide the empirical opportunity to further analyze the impact of the project as it grows and strengthens over time. Various external actors may conduct their own studies, which you should consider when designing and implementing your project. These will help you better understand the perceptions of the local community and contrast them with the development plans you have for the context you want to influence and change. It is important to read, analyze and contrast your own data and archival materials using active dynamics, such as creating discussion groups that involve the young people participating in the project. It is also important to build strong relationships with governmental and other institutions, as their data and knowledge of the project's context are necessary for its development.

TIP

One of the main difficulties in running reading mediation projects with young people is having a small budget. Therefore, it is important to plan to use some of your budget to conduct a study that will help you understand the impact of your project, where it can grow, and what needs to be improved. This data will bring transformative awareness to your proposal. It will also provide useful information when applying for infrastructure and other resources needed to grow the project. However, this should not be one of your first priorities, but something to consider as the project grows.



2. Grupo Promotor

The Grupo Promotor is one of the most interesting elements to observe within the internal mechanisms that make up the Mandarache Project. Its importance is such that it is highlighted in this guide as often as the young people. I would define it as a conclave or meeting place made up of the mediators of the project. In other words, professionals in the field of education and culture, among whom the teachers of the high schools of Cartagena stand out. This group also includes librarians, booksellers, and other mediators from outside formal education. In recent years, young people have also become part of the Grupo Promotor. These people have participated in Mandarache during their high school education and have also participated in complementary activities such as Libreta Mandarache or Radio Mandarache, thus developing a strong personal attachment to the project and, after graduating from high school, have asked to participate in the decision making and selection of the shortlisted texts. Finally, one of the main actors of the Grupo Promotor is the team assigned to the project by the Concejalía de Juventud. They are the ones who organize the meetings, the educational spaces and the distribution of the books. I will further develop this topic in Step 3 of this guide.

This professional team fulfills a fundamental social function through a democratic and binding body that promotes dialog. They are part of the participating agents who voluntarily create spaces for literary conversation for young people. **The task of reading mediation is influenced by the need to carry out this project through an assembly that allows young**

people to see their own experiences reflected in others. This helps them to grow through connecting and transforming conversations. This is how the feedback lines are built. Pedagogical tools and material resources are provided so that the conversation can be live. The necessary tools are built and scrutinized in meetings and regular briefings.

The teachers who participate in the project do not have to be part of the Grupo Promotor. Although they are related, they are two different parts of the project. It is possible to participate in the project as a teacher and not be part of the Grupo Promotor by helping their students form reading committees and participating in meetings and activities. In this way, the teachers outside the Grupo Promotor have a mediating role that has more to do with how they perceive education and reading in the classroom than with the project itself. By negotiating with their schools, they create spaces for what they consider relevant. Being part of the Grupo Promotor means compromise and effort: to select the runners for each edition, dozens of books are read (which can be an incentive for some people), and you have to go to about 15 meetings a year to organize, decide, and so on. Everyone who is part of the Grupo Promotor does it voluntarily and outside of their working hours. However, they participate in the representation of the schools and organizations they work for. They are people who are committed to the goals of the project and who give generously of their time for the benefit of the community and the young people who live in it.

In schools, teachers can choose to work with the selected books outside the classroom (organizing lunchtime meetings or in the school library) or as an in-class reading activity. This does not mean that the books should be part of the required reading for the year, on the contrary, these books are to be read for the Hache and Mandarache Awards. The books chosen as required reading in the schools should be chosen by the faculty of each school. The idea is that the reading of the books chosen for Mandarache will not be an obstacle to the school's academic proposal, but will be part of the integral development of the young people.

Creating a dialog around books is part of the teacher's role. In fact, the impact of the project is based on maximizing the number of reading encounters in an organic way. It is not a question of imposing or intervening in the internal processes of each committee and even of each participant, but of promoting the sense of responsibility of the participating young people through the relationship that each participant has with books. The teacher must insist that they are autonomous actors in the development of a project in which they are the protagonists.

In this sense, when faced with a personal project that aims to link young people and literary reading, this group of people provides Mandarache with support in debates, interaction and mediation within the community. In this case, due to the educational nature of the awards, it is secondary schools that are invited to participate. This is not a limitation, on the

contrary, it is a suggestion. It is important to take into account the work of the community and to analyze and find ways to form alliances that give each project its own identity. It can be with people related to libraries, to bookstores, with families, with NGOs, with neighborhood associations, with cultural centers, or even with a diverse group of people from the above-mentioned backgrounds. The most important thing is to have a clear idea of what you want to achieve with each project, so that you can start meetings, listen to different opinions, reach agreements, and set the ground rules for participation and implementation.

TIP

It is important to emphasize the voluntary nature of the work carried out by the members of the Grupo Promotor, although they represent the institutions for which they work. The structure of the group is not fixed. Each of the people who make up the group can choose to be less involved if their personal needs require it. It is important to keep the doors open so that the project can be strengthened by the arrival of new people or the return of those who have left.



2.1. Book selection

One of the most important tasks of the Grupo Promotor is to select the books to be included in each edition of the Awards. We will describe each of these processes in detail in Step 3, but it is important to highlight the selection of books as one of the most important tasks of the Grupo Promotor. The selection of books is free. Each participant can suggest any book they feel is relevant within the selection criteria:

- Participating books must be written in one of the official languages of Spain and, if necessary, translated into Spanish.
- They must be recently published: two to three years old at the most. In this sense, I would like to clarify that the project, in its search for recently published books, is not influenced by the urgencies of the market, and what is often achieved by selecting a particular title is to prolong its life in the bookstores.
- The authors of the selected books must agree to participate in the project's activities and to travel to Cartagena for the meetings and to receive the award if they win.
- Each book needs to meet the criteria of textual and artistic quality. They must offer the participants a varied literary panorama that reflects the richness of contemporary literature.
- The books must offer a committed literary education, with a variety of voices, genres and tones. They must generate enlightened debates, complex dilemmas, and even social awareness, while trying to avoid any form of paternalism or condescension, as well as literary proposals that abound in the mercantilist idea of reading as leisure and escape. They must be books that serve to grow, to break one's sense of self, to get to know otherness. The goal is to promote literary art in its full transformative potential through books that provoke sophisticated questions about the world we live in and the people who inhabit it.



In this pre-selection of books, there is a mixture of books selected by the different people who make up the Grupo Promotor and those sent by publishers to be considered for the two awards. From the initial list of dozens of books, the process of reading, discarding and adding new books begins. This is a continuous process of reading and evaluation, carried out in a working group structure. In the end, up to 200 books may be read and evaluated during a school year to select the runners-up for the next edition. These books are read, discussed, and selected as potential candidates for the awards. It is important that the final proposal, to be read by young people as the final jury, includes three books for each of the categories.

For both the Hache and the Mandarache, three books are selected that must open different dialogues. In other words, they must be different from each other and at the same time comply with the aesthetic, thematic, literary and structural values of the awards. Grupo Promotor has a very clear vision when it comes to selecting the books, even if the criteria of the people who select the books are very heterogeneous, since they come from different areas (schools, libraries, book clubs, cultural centers, etc...). It is not a filter, but a critical exercise that, through organized debate in assemblies, manages to balance editorial proposals and their possible impact on the cultural conversation. Alberto Soler Soto, coordinator of the Mandarache and Hache Awards since their inception, is very clear about which books should be offered to young people: *“Evasive reading is very important in the enjoyment of literature for any reader, even more so for the most incipient readers, but institutions cannot transmit an idea of literature as mere leisure and free time. That is to confine it, to put literature in a cage, to understand it as a market product, to deprive it of its enormous power to question us and to make us grow as human beings.”*

“There is a very good atmosphere, the teachers do it in their free time, which means time, effort, often reading things you don't want to read, it's work, but almost all of us look forward to the meetings because the atmosphere is fantastic, it fills you with energy to share with people who are working on the same thing as you, without pressure, with a good rhythm of work. And then to have some recognition, to be able to say Mandarache without having to explain it, because people already know it. It is a recognition of years of work.”

**Carmen Usero, mother and book club moderator,
Grupo Promotor member.**

The process of selecting the books for future editions runs parallel to the activities for the existing editions of the Awards. The evolution of both processes is natural, thanks to the spirit of change and the involvement of teachers who volunteer their time to maintain the prestige of the Awards and the interest in reading in the classroom. In this second phase of the project, in which the young people take the lead and interact with the selected works, the team of teachers involved in the project is very important.

Whether they are part of the Grupo Promotor or not, in the case of secondary schools, it is the teachers who lead the reading committees. They are the ones who stimulate and support the reading process of the students. They emphasize the characteristics of different works, such as understanding authors as creative figures. In other words, they provide them with the necessary tools to reflect on their votes in a responsible and coherent way, based on their knowledge.

The selection of books is one of the many assembly dynamics that make Grupo Promotor an important element of the project. It is important to keep this in mind when thinking about your own proposal. It is not an arbitrary selection of books, but a selection based on the parameters chosen as topics of interest. In other words, there are selection criteria that correspond to the interests of the project and that favor the development of the planned activities. Among these criteria, the literary quality of the works is valued the most. The process also promotes the linguistic richness of the country by reading titles originally written in the different official languages of the country, on the condition that they are translated into Spanish, in order to make these books accessible to the entire student community or participating readers in Cartagena. And, perhaps more importantly, the works must be recently published so that the topics of discussion are current and allow for real interaction with the authors. These are necessary elements that go well with the other activities. This is why it is important to define your own selection criteria when you start your own project. They are the starting point of the game. Once you have defined the criteria, the rest of the elements will fall into place. In a sense, you are creating the structure that will give your project its own identity.

2.2. How to react to the book market?

In this segment, it is important to highlight the differences between the book market and the work that publishers do to promote literary education and the Mandarache project. Grupo Promotor is committed to the act of reading as a way to stimulate critical thinking, but in order to achieve this, it must break with the labels that publishers place on content for young people. It is true that there is an imbalance between the books read for the Hache Award and those read for the Mandarache in terms of genre diversity. However, there is a slow but steady effort to pave the way for new publishing opportunities.

It is about understanding the market, knowing what it is like, but also being responsible for the options that are offered to young people as they build their own paths. Grupo Promotor acts as a mediator of choice. They want to highlight the cultural heritage, but also make a social, aesthetic, narrative and discursive proposal on which to build references for collective conversation. This literary and cultural prescription aims to propose a debate on cultural curation and to provide young people with the tools to shape their own paths after experiencing the project. This is much more relevant today, in a world where the digital world dictates paths through algorithms and commercial interests, avoiding the issues that matter in the community or in the development of an aesthetic and personal imaginary.

The intellectual and reading autonomy of young people is one of the rights that Mandarache wants to guarantee. By giving them access to different books, the project wants to help them avoid being influenced by the increasingly demanding proposals that seek to establish an easy connection with adolescents and young people by getting them "hooked". Grupo Promotor's proposals aim to offer a diverse selection of books, allowing young people to build a path away from the mass reader.

As part of this process, the Mandarache Project is committed to making books widely available to the youth population including young people who read regularly, sporadic readers or those who are just starting out. Books for everyone. A book for everyone who participates in the project. It is a reformulation of the commercial value of books to offer the democratic and egalitarian possibility for everyone to approach and discuss the contemporary offer. **A special feature of this proposal is that it does not focus solely on books produced for the young adult market, but rather on opening up the possibility for young people to approach books in general.** That's why I want to reiterate that although the weight of the selection falls on the importance of the literary, the selection is also made in search of diverse works that provoke debate through complex questions. This allows the young population to have collective and active conversations, showing signs of civic education in which the participation and coexistence of young people prevails.

At this point, it is time to look at the materials. It is the books that activate the conversation among all the participants, and the rest of the complementary activities are articulated around them. The book is proposed, chosen, bought, read, shared, discussed, voted on: the book wins. These books are then not returned, but remain in the hands of the young participants, who have to negotiate with the rest of their reading committee about which one to keep. At the end of each edition, each young person keeps one of the books they have read and takes it home. A young person who participates in the project for several years ends up creating their own small Mandarache library, which is also accessible to the rest of their family or friends. Behind all this journey around an object, there is conversation, work and mediation. There is no project without books, just as there is no project without a support network, without groups of volunteers willing to activate the processes, or without young readers. Books are part of the whole, but they are the spark that activates the process.

The purchase of books, a recurring theme in this guide, is one of Mandarache's largest and most necessary expenses. But the fact that the young people keep the books after the vote, and not just borrow them, is also part of the investment that Mandarache decides to make. These are not books that will be returned after the project, but books that will help build the first libraries of many homes. To be able to do this, however, there is an investment and agreements that help to make this action sustainable. Therefore, each new project must be independent in the way it decides to use its resources, since it will depend not only on its objectives, but also on the resources it has at its disposal. What is important is that the material activates the action and that the procedures for the care and maintenance of these materials are sustainable and take into account the particular reality of each project.



“At the beginning, it was very difficult for the book selected by our publishing house to reach the public within the institutes. Now it has a readership that was unimaginable before. That is the magic of the award, that this book, which would have been read by far fewer people, is now outside its usual sphere, provoking young readers, but also opening the authors' minds to other horizons, to the sensitivity of these new readers.”

Carlos Rod, editor of La Uña Rota (The Broken Nail).

3. 1. Driving institutions and entities

Building alliances is crucial for projects like Mandarache. These are the organizations and institutions that are, to a greater or lesser extent, supporters of the Mandarache project:

Ayuntamiento de Cartagena and Concejalía de Juventud: They are the engine and the structure of the Mandarache and Hache Awards. It is the institution that coordinates the project and organizes all the activities and processes related to it.

Spanish Ministry of Culture: The Directorate General of Books, Comics and Reading (Dirección General del Libro, del Cómic y de la Lectura) supports the project financially by purchasing books for the reading committees. It also promotes Mandarache as an exceptional project in the field of reading mediation.

Educational centers: In this sense, it is important to emphasize that youth associations, secondary schools, public educational centers and universities are at the heart of the project. On the one hand, it is important to highlight the involvement of secondary school teams and teachers who are not Spanish language and literature teachers. Mandarache involves teachers of history, philosophy, music, drawing, physical education, French, English, school counselors, school librarians... Reading is a transversal objective in school curricula, and the project attracts teachers



who read no matter what they teach. Similarly, there are various reading committees made up of students from different universities in the region. In 2017, as mentioned at the beginning of the guide, an important variation was added to further develop the award. It was decided to include schools at an international level, specifically from the cities of Cartagena de Indias in Colombia and Cartagena in Chile, with the Orillas program. This program integrates high schools, young people and teachers at an international level. This shows that the project continues to grow and that its expansion in the Spanish-speaking world is still possible.

“The Mandarache Award has proven to be an important channel for international dissemination, with books reaching Colombia and Chile and attracting the interest of other readers.”

Maribel Martínez, editor at the publishing house Lóguez.

Libraries: The work of the librarians is naturally integrated into the Grupo Promotor, which plays an important role in the selection of books. The idea is that they not only contribute their background knowledge, but also train all the cultural axes of this social network in an articulated way to generate an active conversation with young and adult audiences. As a gesture of integration, the adult public over thirty years of age, who are members of the reading clubs of the libraries of Cartagena, also read the books competing for the award, although they do not have the right to vote.

Bookstores: As in the case of the libraries, the idea is to gradually integrate all the agents in the community who serve the book market. In its early years, the Grupo Promotor was supported and advised by bookseller Ana Escarabajal. This role has now been taken over by Vicente Velasco of La Montaña Mágica bookstore.

Publishers: They are the instrumental part of the project. Their contribution is twofold. In the first phase, publishers submit samples of relevant works to be evaluated by the Grupo Promotor. In the second phase, the Grupo Promotor decides on the selection of the six works that will participate in the awards. In addition, to cover the costs, the Ministry orders a special edition on demand, with a different price and ISBN, an inside sheet with a description of the project and the institutional logos on the back cover.





TIP

Be open to building professional networks. Think about the common good. Participate in the work of other institutions and neighborhood associations. Propose regular meetings to disseminate information about all cultural activities in the community. Observe the functioning of the local ecosystem, apart from the leadership, in terms of institutional complicity and citizen participation. Participate and invite others to participate. Build alliances and you will multiply the impact.

Other institutions: There are several institutions that participate directly or indirectly in the development of the awards. We find direct action in one of the extensions of the project, Libreta Mandarache (Mandarache Notebook), a workshop that each year seeks to stimulate the literary creation of a small group of young people through active and evolving participation. This initiative has been carried out since 2017, in collaboration with the library of the National Museum of Underwater Archaeology. The museum has adopted Libreta as its own project. This is an innovative way of reaching out to young people as part of its educational program.

The Fundación Mediterráneo (Mediterráneo Foundation) collaborates by making its spaces available for meetings with the authors. It also participates in the project by reading the selected books with its adult book clubs, such as those in the Municipal Libraries, the Universidad de Mayores de la UPCT (Senior University) and the Santa Ana Neighborhood Library "Teleo". The Literary Workshops of the Popular University and other women's associations participate in the same way.

The Centro de Profesorado y Recursos de la Región de Murcia (Murcia Regional Teaching and Resources Center) offers certification to teachers who participate in training courses and seminars related to the project.

And institutions such as the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation and Acción Cultural Española (AC/E) are vital to the development of projects like Orillas, which is committed to the Spanish-speaking and international integration of the award.

Step 3

Timelines

1. Participants

In order to carry out the various activities that make up the project, it is necessary to call on the participation of agents, some of whom come from different driving entities and institutions. It is the human power of each of the contexts, with their own voices and their exercise of public responsibility, what brings the activities together.

Young people: As emphasized throughout the guide, the project would be meaningless without them. The idea is to bring them together, arouse their interest and encourage their active participation around books and access to culture. In this sense, the project promotes the idea of democracy. Their voices and their participation in decision-making through debates and votes are the fundamental pillars of the project. It is in the idea of integration that the reading committees come into play. Committees are participatory bodies and through them young people can approach different reading routes. The mechanism of the awards and their complementary activities create the responsibility of being part of a jury in the constitution of the reading committees, which in turn become spaces to meet other young people and bring the possibility of mirroring one's own reading experience in that of others in the peer group.

Workers from the Concejalía de Juventud: Symbolically, they are the link between theory and practice. In practice, they are the coordinators and those who provide the resources.



QUESTIONS

What are your strategies for practicing reading mediation with young people?

Are there active participation networks among community members in your community?

Do you have support from your city, institutions or other administrations?

Teachers: we have already discussed their role in detail, but we would like to reiterate that they are one of the most important actors in the project. Their voluntary work and the links they establish between young people, schools and public institutions form a committed body for active citizenship. They are key supporters in two ways. First, in the book selection process, when they are part of the Grupo Promotor. And secondly, the teachers, who are not part of the Grupo Promotor, help the students to participate in the meetings and activities and support and stimulate the debates in the committees.

Authors: They are the voice behind the books. They are the counterpart of the cultural dialog generated by the reading of the shortlisted titles. They are individuals who, once selected, accept a series of conditions to participate in the different events and to meet the participating readers. The six finalists visit Cartagena according to a carefully planned schedule, where they hold large meetings in auditoriums and visit high schools and other cultural centers, not as an act of promotion or competition, but in an attitude of cultural dialogue prior to the final vote by the young jury. The relationship between these figures in the project is better understood in the Implementation section of this guide.



Librarians and mediators: library staff, social workers, people from the Universidad Popular, volunteer moderators of book clubs and other professionals from non-formal education. They are agents who, through their institutions, facilitate access to the selected books in spaces outside the conventional school environment.



“The books read for Mandarache are not something to be forgotten when the school year is over. They are used in the classroom and at home. For example, there are teachers who continue to work with some of the books for years to come. It goes beyond trends. Each of these readings also empowers young people. It is often the children who suggest to their mothers and fathers that they read some of these books. This creates strong family bonds.”

Ángeles Martínez Sánchez, mother of participants of the Mandarache and Hache Awards.

Young volunteers: they bring added value and guidance to the development of the various events. Their work consists mainly of technical and organizational support.

Adult reading clubs: people over thirty who, with the help of libraries and other associative spaces, read the books selected for the Mandarache as part of their corpus. This group cannot vote in the awards, but they can participate in meetings with the authors when they visit Cartagena. Their role is relevant because they represent the part of the community that reads, and they do so in an articulated way along the young population, placing the act of reading as an attempt at local collective dialogue.

Families: they do not play an explicit role in the development of the project, but families cannot be overlooked as fundamental actors in the transmission of reading and cultural habits. They are meant to accompany and support from home. The fact that the reading clubs in the libraries promote the reading of the works nominated for the Mandarache Award often creates spaces for intergenerational encounters around books between members of the same family. While the mother reads the book in the club, her daughter evaluates it in the committee, opening a door to dialogue at home through shared reading. This agent demonstrates that the project aims to create reading environments that encourage dialogue around books.

2. Other actions for the growth of the project

After experiencing the impact of the project on their lives, some young people choose to become more involved in the project by participating in some of the complementary activities that Mandarache has created over the years. In this way, the Concejalía de Juventud creates alternative new spaces for literary reflection. It creates new branches of the project through direct action and in an evolutionary way. This helps to consolidate the awards, but it also helps to build the identity of the project, making it grow and giving young people a broader idea of the act of reading and of the literary. I could have placed this section further along in the guide, as one of the consequences of the timetable, but the interesting thing is that the people who are currently the protagonists of some of the activities of the awards belong to these places. In other words, you can really see the growth of a project when the parts of the whole start to become an indivisible entity.

Libreta Mandarache: is an action for young people with the aim of educating them about writing and literary creation. It is a proposal for direct action in the field of literary work. It focuses not only on fiction, but also on criticism, research and publishing. It aims to create a space for reflection on books and the professions that revolve around them. Each year, a group of 15 young people is selected to study these topics. One of the activities organized as part of the project is a series of six master classes with the selected authors of that year's edition. Libreta



Mandarache is organized in collaboration with the library of the National Museum of Underwater Archaeology. The workshops are supervised by the museum's director and professor and take place in one of the museum's rooms.

“This project has changed me as a person. Being able to be in touch with Mandarache, with the podcast, not only because I feel I owe it to Mandarache, but because I like it, I feel connected to what I like: thinking, writing. I enjoy it, it is therapeutic.”

Alejandro Egea Galán, participant of the Mandarache and Hache Awards, 21 years old.

Radio Mandarache: is a series of podcasts created with the intention of developing the project in the media. This branch of the project gathers a diverse range of participation, using the literary as a link. It is the young people who give voice to the spaces. So far, the literary workshop of Mandarache has produced three radio shows and an independent radio soap opera. Of the three radio shows, Hableemos, Ojos de Perra Azul and Falsos Positivos, the first two are still running.

Ojos de Perra Azul was created as a participatory educational project. In an innovative and creative way, it reflects on themes related to literature and reading, with the aim of raising social and political awareness among young people of different ages.

Hableemos follows the progress of the Mandarache and Hache Awards and has become a virtual meeting place between the participating readers and the authors involved in the project. This podcast has been run for two years by Iván García Bertachini, one of the young people who participated in the first editions of Libreta Mandarache. He is also a member of Ojos de Perra Azul.

Orillas Mandarache: This action, mentioned earlier in this guide, has the intention of gradually internationalizing the project, building bridges with young people and teachers across borders, in the sister cities of Cartagena de Indias (Colombia) and Cartegena (Chile). The implementation of the project follows the same steps as the regular awards, with the distribution of free books and the creation of reading committees with the support of the teachers. The Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation and Acción Cultural Española (AC/E) collaborate in this project.

It is important to reiterate that all these actions are part of the stimulus that generates the creation of a project. Reflecting on them highlights the possible ramifications of years of experience and investment. They are ideas, explorations and the result of continuous work on the awards. Mandarache was not initially a large project with multiple branches, but **a small initiative with an educational intention through an award formula, and as it developed, new lines of action were created to meet the needs of the public, which also grew.** These activities are just examples of the multiple possibilities that can be generated as a project grows, proposing other spaces for exploration and even building loyalty among participants. **The idea is to move from less to more. Do not try to cover everything at the beginning of a project, as this can lead to a lot of frustration and work overload.** It is important that resources and actions are of the same size in order to have a growing development.

3. Implementation

Throughout this guide, each of the main actors that make up the structure of the Mandarache project have been outlined. However, some of their functions will become clearer when we understand the functioning and development of the project. The Mandarache project is based on the idea of cooperation between the actors of participation. When organizing the chain of responsibilities, I notice that the Concejalía de Juventud of Cartagena is the starting point and detonator of the actions. It is this institution that acts as a political link at the administrative level and therefore supports, not only symbolically, but also operationally, the implementation of each of the activities that make up the project's timeline. This team of people obtains and manages the budgets and is therefore the pillar for the organization of each of the components and activities of the project.

TIP

This is the best tip I can give you: do not be too ambitious when presenting your initiative. Measure your strengths and create a project that you can control and use to test its acceptance and potential for development. Let it grow organically. The Mandarache Award started as an experiment, with a small scope, and grew as it gained more attention and success in its environment.



The work continues in two different directions, depending on how you look at it. One of the qualities of the project is that two processes take place simultaneously: The Grupo Promotor's selection of books for the next year's edition, and the local youth's selection of the winning book of the year. In each of these two processes, there are other specific actions in which each actor plays a different role. For this reason, in order to understand in detail how the project works, the explanation of the simultaneous actions will be divided into two timetables: a) the scheduling of the Mandarache and Hache Awards, where we will understand the actions that take place around the awards and that are directed towards the participants; and b) the organizational timeline, where the actions that take place behind the scenes and that prepare the ground for the next edition of the awards will be explained.

3.1. Scheduling of the Mandarache and Hache Awards

This section examines the timeline that corresponds to the organization of the Mandarache and Hache Awards and its activities. It is important to note that in both schedules the executive actions are carried out by the team of the Concejalía de Juventud. They work with precision so that the functions of each process do not overlap. Although this team is the starting point of the chain of work, the next mechanism is formed by the mediators and the young people who will be the protagonists of this process.

At this point I would like to revisit an important distinction made earlier in this guide:

- People between the ages of 12 and 14 take part in the Hache Award.
- People between the ages of 15 and 30 take part in the Mandarache Award.

This division is important because it marks a developmental arc in the participants. A young person who goes from participating in Hache to participating in Mandarache could also be passing through a milestone in his personal and reading maturity, and through a period of intellectual growth that is intensified and strengthened by the acquisition of reading and cultural habits. Moreover, the organization and the actors that make

up each of these two categories are different. The young people who participate in the Hache Award have a strong relationship with their teachers. The participants in the Mandarache Award, on the other hand, are much more autonomous. It brings together university students and other participants from outside the academic world.

3.1.1. Registration campaign: September through December

At the beginning of the school year, between September and December, the process of registering young people in the reading committees to be part of the jury of the awards begins. Although today, thanks to the importance of the awards in Cartagena, the registration campaign is strongly promoted by word of mouth, it is important to remember the important promotional role played by the faculty and other school environments.

It is important to highlight the promotional investments made in the public space. For example, posters in the streets and at bus stops are hung to encourage young people to join the jury. It is not for nothing that the participation rate has increased. Despite a slight drop in participation during the pandemic⁴, the 2024-2025 edition has the highest participation rate since the project began. Some 7,782 people have registered in more than 1,300 reading committees. Registration is online, but is not formalized until the books are distributed to all reading committees.

4. Between March 14 and July 21, Spain declared a state of alarm due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that the Spanish population was confined to their homes. COVID-19 is the acute respiratory syndrome that affected the global population. Many high-attendance activities and meetings were canceled throughout the year until they could be held at a lower risk.

What is a reading committee?

This is the basic form of registration and participation in the Awards. To carry out the registration, committees of six people must be formed. They must be willing to read and evaluate the selected works. Each member must be between 12 and 30 years old, study, work, live or be born in Cartagena, and must provide a signed authorization to be photographed, as they will be participating in a series of public events. Once registered, they have to collect two copies of each of the three titles nominated for each award, which are provided free of charge by the Concejalía de Juventud. In this way, they can take turns reading the books and decide together which one they like best.

It is a teacher who coordinates the committees formed in secondary schools (and social service cultural centers). But there are also committees created by some young people who are not in high school, university, associations or other spaces of non-formal education. For these people, committees formed by three people instead of six are sometimes allowed, so that it is easier for them to be part of the jury.

Voluntary reading

The Mandarache books are not part of the compulsory school reading program. Each teacher, in the case of the secondary schools, integrates and manages the reading of the books within the school framework: improvised reading clubs during breaks, meetings in the school library, conversations in class or in the corridors, reading at home. Much more autonomous and outside any form of evaluation, these committees carry out an exercise of independent exploration. Each committee member reads, shares, and discusses inside and outside the school. They also carry this conversation into the family space. A nine-month reading process is initiated, during which each member must read three books. These books are not borrowed, and participants keep them at the end of the process. The impact of the book in the home can trigger many things like leading to new reading recommendations well beyond the awards.

University students are offered two university credits as an incentive for their participation in the committees, thanks to agreements signed with the Polytechnic University of Cartagena and the University of Murcia. Although this is an added value, the percentage of reading committees from universities is low compared to the large participation from secondary schools.



There are also two possibilities for the juries to expand the project in order to promote it and give it an impact beyond the borders. On the one hand, each year a secondary school from another city in the Region of Murcia is invited to participate. Their committees can participate in the reading, voting and other activities. On the other hand, alliances are made with teachers and schools in the Cartagenas of Chile and Colombia so that the nominated books can be sent to them and they can carry out the work of the jury in other countries. This practice of the Orillas Mandarache project also proposes a debate on publishing production in Spanish between Spain and other Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America, with a commitment to plurality and the search for collective lines of action.

3.1.2. Meetings with authors: January through March

During the second trimester of the school year, between the months of January and February, the Concejalía de Juventud organizes a series of activities that are part of the reading process of the committees. These are activities that complement and give new dimensions to the books selected for the Mandarache and Hache Awards. In this section we will focus on the cycle of meetings with the shortlisted authors.

Online meetings

To understand this process, we need to highlight the different meetings organized by the Concejalía de Juventud along the participating secondary schools. Firstly, individual online meetings are held with each of the shortlisted authors.

Each meeting with an author is recorded from one of the participating schools, with the young people and faculty participating live while the author talks about their work online. This event is *streamed* on [the Mandarache Project's YouTube channel](#) and the other schools are connected to the broadcast from their respective classrooms. Students have the opportunity to send live questions to the author via Whatsapp voice messages. The audio of these meetings is also edited to create the Hableemos podcast.

On-site meetings

Secondly, the shortlisted authors in each category visit Cartagena. An event featuring the three authors of the Hache Award is held one day, and an event featuring the authors of the Mandarache Award is held another day. This way of bringing three different voices to the events is a result of the pandemic. However, the diversity and richness that comes from a pluralistic dialogue around three different works is one of the most successful recent discoveries of the project. These meetings take place during school hours and have the participation of 1,400 students. They take place in the El Batel Auditorium, the same place where the closing ceremony is held.

TIP

Often we think only of the young people who read to participate in such activities. As adults, we think that taking them out of class to go to an outside event is a reward. On the contrary, perhaps the random creation of these meeting places with young people who are not as connected to reading can be a place to meet, a place to discover, or a place to arouse the curiosity of young people with less academic success or reading habits. We suggest that registration for this type of event should not be limited to those students who are more academically gifted. For students with more irregular academic records, participation in such events can be a turning point that changes their relationship with books.

The management of this event requires the pre-registration of the institutes to which the participating committees belong. Although this event is a way to activate the participation of young people, the seating capacity does not allow access to all the committees that have registered. In order to carry out this activity, it is important to invest in buses to transport the students from their schools to the theater. These buses are part of the investment of the Concejalía de Juventud, which means that they are included in the initial budget. Cartagena is a very large municipality and some of the participating schools are almost 40 km away from where the activities take place. In the specific case of Cartagena, it is essential that the project budget includes the busing costs as a priority, otherwise there would be unequal conditions for students to participate depending on where they come from.

In order to stick to the program, the arrival at the theater has to be organized down to the last millimeter. For that purpose, a map of the theater is prepared with a seating chart, which is color-coded for each registered school. The Concejalía staff organizes the orderly entry of the participating schools and places them in their seats with the help of the group of young volunteers who help during the events. This flexible system allows 1,400 people to fill the auditorium in an orderly fashion in just half an hour.

The young people as agents and not as mere spectators

The events follow a fixed formula: the main voice in each session is that of the young people present. In this sense, the authors are introduced by one of the members of the Grupo Promotor. The introduction must be brief, focusing mainly on the book and less on the guest. The idea is to avoid a long and tedious introduction and to aim for an introduction that inspires and helps the audience to discuss the books in question. This event is about reflecting on what has been read in the presence of the person who wrote it. It is important to always include faculty in project introductions with authors and at the institutional level. Give them a voice, a space, and in this way **project a positive image of faculty as cultural agents in the community.**

Authors know that they are not allowed to give more than three or four minutes of acknowledgements, as the intention is to hand the microphone over to the young people within ten minutes of the start of the event, so that they can discuss their questions about the works. The event consists of one hour and fifteen minutes of questions and discussion between the audience and the authors about the participating books. This creates an inspiring space for debate, an open dialogue that differs from the usual structure of conferences. These events are live spaces of reflection that rely on the audience's talent for thinking and asking questions about the books. The Mandarache project insists that **learning to read means learning to ask good questions of a book.**

TIP

The involvement of the secondary schools in the development of the events is of crucial importance. There are processes that, however small they may seem, are part of a larger action. For example, arranging the necessary permission slips for students to attend the meetings with the authors, or coordinating the buses that take them there.

Between a book festival and a youth fair

After the meetings, there is a book signing in front of the auditorium, next to the port, where the 1,400 participants from the different committees have a space for dialogue. It is important to remember that the books are provided by the Concejalía de Juventud and belong to the committees. In this sense, this close-up encounter with the authors is free of the commercial tinge that usually surrounds live cultural dialogues during book presentations.

The adrenaline rush of the discussion is combined with other literary activities: the creation of a mural of expression, games, competitions, cultural animation activities around the selected books, a photo call and even the live recording of the Hableemos podcast, with the participation of the young people who make up the committees.



Other encounters

In the evening, after the morning activities and the authors' visit to Cartagena, there are meetings in the library of the National Museum of Underwater Archaeology with the young people who participate in Libreta Mandarache. These meetings are inspired by the creative act. The idea is to get to know another side of the authors, where tips, right calls and worries about the act of writing are part of the conversation.

“I remember the Hache meetings as exciting. People from many different schools came together and empathized, flirted, shared enthusiasm, and literature was the reason for it all. It was a celebration of life under the pretext of literature and young people.”

Begoña Oro, winning author of the 2012 edition of the Hache Award.

Finally, in the afternoon, in the 200-seat auditorium of the Fundación Mediterráneo, the authors meet with the adult audience in an event open to the public. The reading clubs of the libraries and the Universidad Popular, who have read their books beforehand, are invited to this activity. From my point of view, this creates a line of action aimed at promoting social conversation around the same topic, framed by the reading of the work and the interview with the author. It is an interesting strategy to integrate the literary conversation in the presence of these cultural guests in the community. This makes it possible to give an identity to the awards, as an act of representation that is not limited to the schools. This activity is alternatively modified in the case of the authors of the Hache Award, who visit the cultural centers that depend on the Concejalía de Atención Social and hold a meeting with the reading committees registered there.

The following day, at the request of the secondary schools, the authors visit some of the participating centers to talk with the students on a smaller scale.

Following this program, which was slowly nurtured as the project grew year by year, each shortlisted author meets with approximately 2,000 people in 48 hours.

3.1.3. Vote: April

The final task of the committees is to vote for the book they feel is the winner in each category. This vote is not the result of a consensus within each committee. It is a vote per person, depending on each person's experience with the works. In this case, the prize is not symbolic. The young people are aware that they are part of a jury that awards a book, not only in the form of recognition on behalf of a youth committee, but also a cash prize of 5,000 euros (3,000 until 2023) and a reproduction of a sculpture by the Murcian artist Ángel Haro to the author of the winning work. This includes both the Mandarache and the Hache Awards.

One of the reasons that I think gives the awards a distinct identity is that the voting process takes place during the week of International Book Day. This is usually about three weeks before the awards ceremony and the end of the programmed activities. Voting takes place on the Mandarache website, where a database and password are created for each committee. Although each participant has one vote, there is only one password per committee. They have five days to vote, from Monday at 8 am to Friday at 8 pm.

Voter turnout is usually over 97%, reflecting a high level of youth engagement. This shows that they remain interested and active in their participation in the project. However, it is true that almost 90% of the votes come from secondary schools, which shows that the faculty and the conventional educational spaces are a great development muscle in the program.



Press release

In the week following the vote, the Concejalía de Juventud organizes the presentation of the results and the announcement of the winners to the local and regional press. A group of young people from a school, previously selected by the Grupo Promotor, is in charge of this presentation. This is a brief but important moment because it is the only time that the young people have an official appearance, and this small group appears in public on behalf of the more than 6,000 people who participate in the program, which gives them considerable symbolic importance. Although the participation and the voice of the young participants are fundamental throughout the process that leads to the awarding of the prizes, this moment is highly symbolic in terms of the image of young people that Mandarache projects to public opinion. It is a prize awarded by young people through a process of collective reading.



“Mandarache is a project that makes you live the literary from a celebratory, joyful and disruptive point of view, in a way that transforms all the actors involved. The power of this project is in the change. It is enough to experience the Grupo Promotor. We have been reading, selecting and rethinking the project for so many years. We are like a big book club that has had to learn to read differently, and over the years we have deconstructed ourselves together. I think the greatest virtue of Mandarache is that it has not only affected the young people to whom it is primarily addressed, but it has also changed us, the faculty and mediators, as readers.”

Alberto Soler, coordinator of the Mandarache and Hache Awards.

3.1.4. Closing ceremony: May

The closing ceremony is a great celebration in the El Batel Auditorium. As an observer, I appreciate the intention to bring joy and excitement to the gathering. It is a powerful manifestation of the affirmation of culture as a way of gathering, of creating spaces, of inclusion. Where all people celebrate together the end of a long process of work. This gala takes place in May in front of an audience of 1,400, mostly young people from the reading committees as well as some public figures from the Ayuntamiento de Cartagena and other institutions.

In this case, the distribution of seats requires an organizational structure similar to that of the meetings with the authors. But this time, it is necessary to take into account the places for the figures that represent the collaborating entities that come to be part of the closing ceremony. The event is a theatrical and performative show currently being produced by Las Monstruas, a performing arts and audiovisual company made up of Inés Muñoz and Andrea Martínez. In order to create the proposal, every year they hold a workshop with a group of young people who participate in the development of the gala. In this sense, the young people do not cease to be protagonists of the gala. In fact, there are no official speeches by institutional representatives, only words of gratitude by the winners of the Mandarache and Hache awards, a moment that takes place when their works are awarded.

The element of surprise during the gala is brought by the announcement of the six works that will be read during the next school year's edition of the awards. This marks the beginning of a new organizational calendar and a new beginning for the project.

3.1.5. Additional awards

The ceremony also includes the presentation of the various complementary awards that the program offers through the cultural and creative activities that take place simultaneously throughout the year. The jury for these awards is made up of members of the Grupo Promotor, who voluntarily evaluate, discuss and select among the proposals submitted.

Additional awards for the young audience

A trophy is awarded for each of these four prizes, along with a cash prize of €200 in books to be spent at any bookstore in the city.

Literary Quotes Video Contest: encourages young participants to take fragments of the finalist works of the Mandarache and Hache Awards and create audiovisual pieces in which they read and promote the selected book. The format should not be limited to those favored in social media, but should be an artistic exercise in which word and image become something new. Each participating video is uploaded to the project's YouTube channel, and the winner is announced on the day of the closing ceremony.

Microfiction Contest: Participants must write short stories of no more than 100 words of their own creation on any topic. These are be published on the project's website so that they can be evaluated by any reader who wishes to do so. However, the winner is not determined by popularity, but by the critical exercise of the members of the Grupo Promotor.



Illustration Award: Entrants are asked to create illustrations in A4 format inspired by the books shortlisted for the Hache Award. The submission process for this award is more formal. The participant must mail or hand deliver their entry to the Concejalía de Juventud in a sealed envelope containing both their work and another envelope containing their personal information.

Award for the best literary criticism: Inspired by the importance of critical reading in the Mandarache Award, this project encourages the young audience to write a piece of literary criticism on one of the three participating books. It should consist of two double-spaced A5 pages, using either Arial or Times New Roman 12. It must be submitted in PDF format and is judged by members of the Grupo Promotor.

Complementary awards for other participating agents

Award for the best work by a team of teachers: This award is intended to recognize the work done by teachers for the Mandarache Project. The proposal must be made through each of the participating high schools and should be accompanied by a report explaining the promotion, mediation and development work done with their students. The jury for this award is made up of non-teaching members of Grupo Promotor. The winning team receives a trophy and a cash prize of 400 euros to be exchanged for books and materials for their school.

Award to the person or institution that has best promoted reading or the Mandarache Project: this is an honorary title and does not award more than a trophy and a mention during the ceremony. In this case, the aim is to recognize the non-governmental organization, association, foundation or institution that has carried out promotional work for the Mandarache Award during the school year of this edition of the project.

3.1.6. Evaluation of the process

One of the most remarkable values of the entire scheduling process is the awareness of time and its use. Creating efficient and realistic schedules helps projects move forward. This requires a lot of planning, but also an understanding of the need for trial and error in a new project. It is necessary to learn how to improve the execution dynamics in the future by understanding which processes take more time than others. Depending on the project, the distribution of time will be completely different, but the important thing is not to give in to the current tendency to do things quickly. Take a deep breath and think about the time needed to move projects forward. Cultural projects need space for reflection, not only for

“The Mandarache Project has a sense of community. I lived it from afar because of the pandemic, and yet I felt it was a collective project. Everyone who participated in the organization, in the meetings, transmitted unity, complicity, a very good energy. And we are talking about a technical structure that seems very big. But on the contrary, it was all very human.”

Tina Vallès, finalist author of the Mandarache Award in 2020.

those who organize them, but also for those who participate in them. It is difficult to measure the results or impact of the activity if these spaces for contemplation and reflection are not taken into account.

Effective proposals often need to be made to justify investment, but results cannot be measured immediately. Three elements that must be negotiated at the beginning of any cultural project are conviction, objectivity and patience. A first edition does not always bring the expected results. Only time will tell if there is a real increase in participation that generates a measurable impact.



3.2. Organizational timeline

This timetable is much more technical and mainly concerns the internal organization of the project and the functioning of the Grupo Promotor. It is important to remember that both timelines run simultaneously and often overlap.

The selection of new books

During the first trimester of the school year, between September and December, the book selection lists are drawn up by the Grupo Promotor. To recap this point, it is worth reading the section on book selection in Step 2 of this guide.

The return to the selection process is important because it is necessary to feed these pre-selection lists with contemporary, recently published books, as well as other works of value that may have been lost in the midst of publishing production. This process of receiving proposals, both from the Grupo Promotor and from publishers, ends in March, but in the months before, the list of possible finalists is drawn up in parallel with the reading and discussion of the proposals. This is a continuous process, with between 150 and 200 titles read each year. The books are borrowed from the publishers in the form of one or two free copies.

To accomplish this mammoth task, the Grupo Promotor is first divided into several working groups that correspond to the literary genres and categories included in the award: fiction, poetry, drama, non-fiction, graphic novels, and young adult literature. This narrows down the broad scope of exploration. Readings begin in September in an ongoing process of evaluation, discussion, elimination, and inclusion of new titles.

In this way, each working group ends up with a much smaller and more manageable selection of books for the rest of the Grupo Promotor. This shortlist of 12 to 15 titles is compiled around January and is read and discussed by all the members of the Grupo Promotor, who meet around March to decide which three books are selected for the Hache Award and which are selected for the Mandarache Award for the following school year. The timing of this decision is important because it is revealed to the public at the closing ceremony for the current edition in May. It is not just a matter of selection, but a rather complex process of negotiation on behalf of the Concejalía de Juventud.

Book purchase

In order to meet the demand for books from the juries of both awards, negotiations are held with the publishers of the books selected by the Grupo Promotor. In the Publishers section of the Guide, you will find the conditions under which they participate as agents in the project. However, I think it is important to remember that in the negotiations between the Ayuntamiento de Cartagena and the publishers, the Concejalía commissions a special edition on request, with a reduced price and a different ISBN code, an inside page explaining the project and the institutional logos on the back cover.

The public expenditure for the purchase of the selected books is made possible thanks to the funds of the Mandarache Project provided by the Ayuntamiento de Cartagena, in collaboration with the Directorate General for Books, Comics and Reading. This special edition is negotiated directly with the publishers.

In my opinion, this means a level playing field between publishers, where major platforms and independent labels engage in dialog on an equal footing. In both cases, to varying degrees, it is a win-win situation in terms of the sale of the title in question, but also in terms of the visibility of these works.



Currently (2024-2025 edition), in order to supply books to the more than 1,300 reading committees involved in both judging panels, the purchase of finalist books for the Mandarache Award is 2,075 copies per finalist title and 1,300 copies for Hache Award titles.

On the other hand, the publication of the book is not the only negotiation that ends this phase. The authors must also commit themselves to attend the meetings and the awards ceremony. It is with them that this second phase of the project is completed. In this sense, managing the dates that suit the finalists and the availability of venues, as well as fitting them into the school calendar, is one of the most complicated moments of the organization. This negotiation usually takes place at the same time as the voting process for the current edition.



Book distribution

The selected books arrive at the Concejalía de Juventud, which is responsible for the general distribution of the books to the participating centers and institutions, so that they reach the more than 6,000 people who make up the reading committees. **Each reading committee receives a set of six books upon registration, consisting of two copies of each title for the Mandarache Award and the same for the Hache Award committees.** The books do not have to be returned; each committee member can keep one of the books at the end of the activity, although they must exchange them to read them all.

They are not the only ones who receive sets of books. Each mediator receives a set of six books, since this is the material they will work with throughout the year. In fact, the Concejalía de Juventud has the sets of books in its rooms before the summer so that interested teachers can read during the summer the books that will be discussed with the committees during the following school year and make the appropriate decisions about how to present the conversation.

Organizing events

The driving force behind the organization of all the activities described in this guide is something I would like to emphasize. It is the Concejalía de Juventud team that is responsible for organizing and budgeting all of the activities described in the [Scheduling of the Mandarache and Hache Awards](#) section. Just by looking at them, it is clear that both schedules are connected by a thin thread that, if broken, would disrupt all of the ongoing processes. In order to move forward with one of the timelines, it is important not to leave the other behind. The need for some of the elements that are organized throughout the year, such as buses, technical production, or the seating plan of the auditorium, may seem like a no-brainer, but they are the ones that require more attention to detail. Explaining them in detail in this guide seems unnecessary, but I really want to emphasize the fact that the timelines run in parallel, and what may seem to be part of organizing one process is actually part of both.

The technical part is always the most difficult, but also the most specific. Each detail is organically integrated into the development of the activities. To give an example in the case of Mandarache, the importance of using buses to transport the young people is overlooked. It is a relevant factor that has to do with the local context and creates equality in the mobility of young students who want to participate in the events. In the same way, you should consider a list of pros and cons of each of the activities that will be developed for the project. Often in the cons, is where the items for improvement are observed. The technical details need to be addressed.

“This project encourages you to read. To be honest, picking up a physical book is a habit that has been lost. I'm not much of a reader, I have few books, but I like to be given the opportunity, and I also like the fact that they are books with topics that are currently being talked about in the street and of different genres. Discovering new things. To me, what happened with a poetry book, I had never read poetry in my life, and suddenly I saw myself reading poems, finding the meaning of things.”

Mario Gómez Requena, participant of the Mandarache and Hache Awards, 16 years old.

There are two essential elements to building a technical timeline: a team and a panoramic view. Sometimes having a team to work with is a challenge due to lack of resources, but two heads think better than one. In this sense, regular briefing sessions and shared to-do lists are important to make any team work. This clearly helps to have a panoramic technical view, but also to keep the focus on what is more human, to plan possible outcomes not only looking at the materialistic or economic side, but being fully aware of the others. The value of cultural activities is measured by the impact they have on people; in the way we have to integrate the other and generate an active conversation in the community about the project we are developing.

There is no better stimulus for the development of a new project than the sense of belonging felt by its participants.

4. Budgets

Talking about money is always uncomfortable. It's a difficult topic to discuss. But it's an important part of project development. It is not the same to think about the profitability of a project starting from scratch as it is to maintain a project that has been growing for years. Comparisons in this sense will always be uncomfortable. When I was thinking about this chapter, I kept stressing the importance of transparency in the processes that are carried out thanks to the money of the public administration. This is not an easy task. Even more so when it is necessary to translate the resources into projects that are born, from the start, without the expectation of a similar budget. However, at the risk of sounding repetitive, let us remember that this guide is just one example of how replicable a project can be. Everyone transforms these tools and adapts them to their own resources, adapted to their own circumstances.

This chapter is an exercise in objectivity. Thinking about the Mandarache project will help us understand how profitable a cultural activity can really be. First of all, it should be noted that the investment comes from the Ayuntamiento de Cartagena and the Spanish Ministry of Culture. This budgetary stability, which we will discuss in more detail later, obviously favors the stability of a project and its effectiveness, but it is not



necessarily its cornerstone. **The real effectiveness of this investment lies in the clarity of the project and, above all, in the fact that the project takes place every year and is maintained over time, with a focus on the medium and long term.** It is very important to have a solid idea, a clear identity and an awareness of the environment in which the project is carried out. Although we will start from the investment, we will list the expenses according to the technical aspects of the project step by step.

4.1. Revenue

The Mandarache project has a budget made up of the sum of two investments from the public administration. First, there is the contribution of the Ayuntamiento de Cartagena, which, although it depends on the municipal budgets for the year, is a relatively stable contribution. Although this investment is an important advantage, we must learn to be very careful because this stability can fluctuate with each annual budget and each government team. In 2020, the budget was 110,000 euros, which was reduced to 91,000 euros the following year, but in the current edition it has increased to 148,000 euros. This new investment also corresponds to the growth of the project. In 2024, 7,782 young people have registered to participate in the Mandarache and Hache Awards (and almost 600 more people from the adult clubs), which represents a 25% increase in registrations compared to the previous year.

In addition to this budget, the project receives financial support from the Directorate General for Books, Comics and Reading of the Ministry of Culture. This contribution supports the purchase of books, one of the main expenses of the Mandarache project.

When justifying expenses, a technical and economic report of the expenses is prepared. In the same way, the expenses of the Ayuntamiento de Cartagena are justified through minor contracts.



4.2. Expenses

I have created the following classification to list the expenses in detail:

Book purchase expenses

Fifty percent of the budget, or slightly more, is spent on purchasing books for the committees, reading clubs, and faculty and other mediating individuals. As explained earlier in this guide, a special edition is negotiated and created with the publishers to reduce costs. However, this decision was not made at the beginning of the project. For the first few editions, books were purchased at the original retail price or at a small discount.

It was in 2018 that the decision was made to commission the books. It wasn't just to reduce costs and reach a greater number of young people, but also to strengthen the identity of the awards. This commissioned edition does not affect the copyrights, and, for the publishers, it means selling a large number of books, which increases every year. In fact, for the 2023 edition, the expenditure on books was increased by 30% to cope with the increase in the number of participants.

This special edition offered the possibility to include in the books the logos of the institutions that finance the awards, as well as an inside page with a brief description of the project. This makes it possible to highlight

the recognition given to the work by being selected for the project, but also to promote the project within the physical format of the books. In other words, the physical books will circulate within the community as they will be present in family and public libraries. And the movement of the books from hand to hand with information about Mandarache will leave a record of the work and the impact of the project.

These editions do not only reach the homes of the young participants of Mandarache, but the libraries of the city also have copies of these special editions. Batches of books are purchased to be read in the reading clubs, which reduces the purchasing costs and also spreads information about the awards to other library users who are not the direct target of the project.

Similarly, the Orillas Mandarache initiative sends books to student reading committees in Cartagena de Indias (Colombia) and Cartagena (Chile). The growth of Orillas Mandarache means an increased investment in books. These shipments currently represent an additional expense that in the future is to be solved by printing locally.

Production expenses

Each of the events and activities that bring young people together with the book and its authors is an investment. The technical details of each event are described in detail in this guide. However, it is important to reiterate that the in-person meetings, the closing ceremony, the various meetings and activities to promote reading on the esplanade in front of the auditorium, or the live writing session that concludes Libreta Mandarache require a structured technical and artistic production.

The budgetary details of the events fluctuate and depend on the requirements of each event. In the case of the Mandarache and Hache Awards, the production of the large-scale activities, the meetings and the awards ceremony held at the El Batel Auditorium require a large investment due to the high number of attendees at each of them (1,400 students). Nevertheless, this type of expenditure depends on the nature and scope of each initiative.

Expenses on authors

To elaborate on this point, it is perhaps most important to understand the activities in which the finalist authors participate. Let's recap: before the obligatory visit to Cartagena, there are two online meetings: a first online meeting that follows a podcast-like structure and is broadcast on YouTube for all the students (who can send their questions to the author live via Whatsapp voice message), and another meeting in a smaller format with the 15 young people who participate in the Libreta Mandarache

workshop. Then, in person, there are the meetings with the reading committees and the participating reading clubs (following a program of activities that involves meeting about 2,000 people in 48 hours). First, there are the meetings and activities at the El Batel Auditorium with 1,400 people; then, in the afternoon, another meeting at the Fundación Mediterráneo with about 200 people; plus a visit to the library of the National Museum of Underwater Archaeology for a special meeting with the group of young people participating in Libreta Mandarache; and the next morning, a visit to one or two high schools.

When it comes to transportation for authors, the costs are usually negotiated with the publishers. For Mandarache, however, the Concejalía de Juventud prefers to take care of transportation and lodging to guarantee comfort. The Ayuntamiento de Cartagena covers the author's expenses for transportation, lodging and food, plus a symbolic amount of 500 euros for participating in all the activities (the reference for the payment to the authors can be the Program of Literary Activities in Secondary Schools of the Directorate General of Books, Comics and Reading, which in 2023 amounted to 390 euros per school visit). For this payment, the Ayuntamiento uses a payment formula called "Settlement for External Collaboration", which is commonly used for professional activities provided by external workers. This is also how the public administration usually pays people who speak at congresses.



Finally, we must add to the expenses the amount granted to the winners of the Mandarache and Hache awards. Until 2022, the award money for both prizes was 3,000 euros, along with the reproduction of a sculpture by the artist Angel Haro (made by the workshops of the Centro Ocupacional Prolam Astus for people with mental disabilities or cerebral palsy). In 2023, the Ayuntamiento de Cartagena increased the economic endowment to 5,000 euros for each of the winning works. If we compare these figures with the endowments of other literary prizes awarded in Spain, we can see that this is not a particularly large reward in monetary terms. **What the Mandarache and Hache Prizes contribute above all is the symbolic value offered by their popular jury. The real value of the prizes is that thousands of young people choose the winning works.**

Marketing expenses

Marketing is key to this type of project. When thinking about how to approach it, it is important to remember that it must be targeted at the young population. In Mandarache, it is very important to have a local campaign when approaching registration times. The aim is to make an impact on the young population, but also to build up anticipation among the rest of the population. To this end, posters are put up at bus stops at the beginning of each school year, and posters and leaflets are printed for distribution in schools, libraries, bookshops and other institutions.

In the same way, audio and video recordings of the activities are also compiled, both for archival purposes and to be used in social media and press releases.

On the other hand, **it is surprising that Mandarache does not have greater visibility at national level.** Although the regional media gives the project sufficient attention, and it is true that Mandarache has occasionally attracted attention in certain sectors, it is also true that it does not have the resonance that such a project should have. Part of this may be due to the centralized nature of the mainstream media and the peripheral location of the project. However, it should also be pointed out that, throughout its history, Mandarache has not had a stable team of people with specialized marketing profiles, as would be expected for an initiative of this scale. For years, the publicity of the project has been the responsibility of the same people who carry out the rest of the tasks: coordination, production, administration...

Marketing is a major investment of effort and professional skills, for which specialized profiles are essential. Moreover, effective communication of cultural and educational projects, which can multiply their visibility, can lead to increased financial resources and have an impact on the stability of the programs. It is therefore important, whenever possible and resources permit, to include communication professionals in the working teams. In the meantime, if it is not possible to have these multidisciplinary teams, we must try to manage communication as far as our resources allow and try not to get frustrated.

Other expenses

All other activities pertaining to the project involve costs:

Radio Mandarache: the podcast network of the Awards; implies the costs of maintaining the platforms, as well as the creation, editing and artistic production of the podcasts.

Libreta Mandarache: the investment to carry out these workshops is a cost shared with the National Museum of Underwater Archaeology. The museum has made these workshops part of its educational project.

Orillas Mandarache: to the expenses for the development and maintenance of this part of the project we should add what we already mentioned in the section on book purchase expenses. In 2023, the Banco de la República financed the visit of the winner of the Mandarache Award to Colombia to meet with students and teachers.



“It doesn't seem expensive for a cultural project that slowly changes its audience. Because the process is not direct, in the end we are talking about young people who read three or six books a year. In fact, you are getting a lot of people to read books that actually make them develop a little bit of critical thinking. That is fundamental. To give them something that at first they do not seem to be ready for, and then it turns out that they are. Because it's not just reading the books and that's it. The teachers are there to accompany them, to guide them. It is an articulated work, mediated by education, which would not work if it was just about giving books. Mandarache has an impact on its community because it has leaders who believe in the project and are passionate about what they do.”

Miguel Ángel Hernández, finalist author of the Mandarache Award, 2020.

4.3. Profitability

We have already seen the main elements in which the Mandarache Project must invest in order to be successful. The numbers of the Mandarache Project are extraordinary for an initiative of a Concejalía de Juventud of a medium-sized city in the southeast of Spain. They can be overwhelming for someone who wants to start their own initiative, but we must remember that projects are born small and, if we are lucky, they get new resources as they develop and their impact grows over time.

I would like to use this topic to highlight something: compared to other cultural initiatives and programs (festivals, fairs, etc.), Mandarache is definitely a profitable program in terms of the investment made by the administrations. The main expenses, excluding complementary activities, amount to approximately 111,000 euros. If we divide this figure by the 7,782 young people who participate in the awards in 2024, we obtain **an average cost per student of 14.26 euros**, which is the average cost of a book. **We are talking about a program that engages thousands of people in a city in reading and involves them in a program of activities that lasts for more than 9 months of the year. The project integrates all sectors of the book and education world in a responsible, horizontal and relevant alliance.** Compared to other public cultural programs, Mandarache is an undoubtedly cost-effective, targeted and efficient investment. In addition, we must take into account the social and cultural impact it has at the local level, which will be measured by the impact it has on the young people of future generations.

TIP

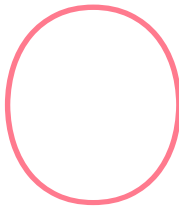
Getting a project off the ground is not just about money. You need to understand the nature of your idea and your audience. From there, build the connections that will help you realize the project and understand which entities may be interested in supporting your initiative. Try to keep a rigorous record of administrative and technical documentation. Step by step, you will develop the idea and define its themes in order to discover new needs and improve different aspects of your proposal.

With this example, I would like to emphasize that the current figures reflect a project that has been gradually growing for almost 20 years. These figures should not discourage the creation of new projects since, for example, the budget for the first editions of the Mandarache Award did not exceed 15,000 euros. **It is a question of starting activities according to the resources available. The very development and success of the project will bring in new resources.** Do not miss the opportunity to carry out a cultural project with young people. All you have to do is draw up a viable and sustainable action plan, taking into account the resources available.

Step 4

Results

1. Data analysis

 rganized data collection is one of the most necessary tasks around a project. Classifying the measurements in terms of participation and enrollment is part of the analysis necessary for project evaluation.

When it comes to analyzing the results, the first data we need to record is the number of registrations. In the year before the pandemic, 2019-2020, there were a total of 6,051 participants. The number of participants was affected by a 2021 without Mandarache due to COVID-19. After that, there were 5,200 young participants in the 2021-2022 academic year. However, the 2024-2025 academic year saw a record number of young participants with more than 7,782 registrations. With this in mind, it is important to note the increase in the number of participants moving from the Hache Award to the Mandarache Award due to their age.

In 2021, [an extensive impact study](#) was carried out by the expert consultant **David Roselló Cerezuela**, director of Nexe Cultural SL, which examines in detail each aspect of the project. To understand the impact of the project in more detail, I recommend reading the study, which provides interesting figures, data and reflections on the project.

“I had the opportunity to be a part of it twice, in very different years. I have seen how the project has withstood the economic crises, survived the cuts and expanded its activities for young audiences. And this is what I appreciate most: the socialization. There are many children who like to read, but they are at an age when they have to create their own group, build their identity with others, which affects reading because there are no spaces where they can share it. Mandarache not only provides this space to share reading, but also makes it popular. I am still impressed when I meet young people who were part of the first generations of Mandarache and who are still helping, participating and collaborating many years later. This creates something bigger than reading in the city, it has to do with community building. These are people who believe that the project is theirs and that they are part of it. The project makes it possible for several generations to have gone through the same thing and to have something to share. That is very powerful.”

Isaac Rosa, finalist author of the Mandarache Award, 2012 and 2019.

Why is this data useful? Identifying inequalities in the approach to reading is fundamental to understanding how to look for possible solutions. Prejudice around the idea of reading is one of the factors that needs to be constantly worked on. In a project like this, creating spaces that guarantee equal access to reading should be one of the priorities.

2. Evaluation

It is not only a matter of quantifying the data to understand the social and cultural impact of the project, but also of identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the processes. It is important to analyze both. Strengths are those functional elements that can be used to analyze the scope and impact of the project. Weaknesses are those elements that need to be reviewed. What needs to be changed to improve the various processes.

At the qualitative level, we refer to the impact study carried out in 2021. However, there are also evaluations carried out during the development of ongoing activities. The members of the Promotor Group fill in a web form in which they evaluate the development of the activities, the processes of reading and selection of finalists and the dynamics of decision-making. The data and contributions extracted from these forms are evaluated and compared in a subsequent face-to-face meeting. Similarly, a technical evaluation is made of the roles played during the various activities by both the suppliers and the collaborators responsible for the complementary lines of the project.

The young people who take part in Libreta Mandarache, the podcast Hablemos and Ojos de Perra Azul, as well as participants of other related activities, are people who contribute to the continuous evaluation of the project. With the intention of improving or transforming each proposal in the future, anonymous questions are often used.

“As a result of my participation in Libreta Mandarache at the age of 15, I realized how the project had changed me. Mandarache introduced me to unexpected friendships, allowed me to dare to write and to have a place and a people to share it with. Social space is very important in the awards. Also, I like that it is something ours, of the people of Cartagena. And if I stay on the podcast or participate in other activities, it's because they are a challenge, they challenge me to think about issues that I wouldn't think about in my daily life. Also because I feel that I am giving something back to Mandarache for all that it has done for me.”

Mercedes Serrano Conesa, participant of the Mandarache Award, 20 years old.

TIP

If possible, and if the budget allows, it is a good idea to invest in a sociological study of the project or in data collection that will allow you to know not only the real impact of what you are doing, but also the strengths, weaknesses, and main issues that need to be improved. Ask yourself this question: do I have the data to justify the need for this action? If the answer is no, you run the risk of taking action based on judgment, instinct, or a (personal) view of reality. Working from data is always desirable. If the budget allows, the best strategy is to collect data and do a sociological analysis of it.

As a
conclusion

After closely observing the Mandarache project, I feel a deep admiration for it. This sounds like a simple conclusion, but it is not. This admiration comes from the idea of what is possible. How a seemingly simple idea took shape in the hands of a cultural and educational community in search of something in common, literature. This journey through the Mandarache and Hache Awards is not an example, but rather a stimulus, a story that becomes meaningful when experienced firsthand. Its impact goes beyond what is said about these awards in the literary proposals for young people in Spain, but in what those who participated in the project have to say: young people, teachers, writers, publishers, families, librarians⁵. This is civil dialogue made possible. Twenty years of transversal dialogue with several generations of young people from different economic backgrounds have not been in vain. It is the possibility of reading and sharing books that allows different people to relate to each other. However, I would like to summarize and organize my final thoughts into the following topics:

1. This guide shows a sustainable project with timelines, processes, and numbers that explain the decisions that led to its growth. However, I insist that the original idea was small and grew organically through trial and error.
2. It is possible to create a civic cooperation project through the figure of a Grupo Promotor. With this type of organization, a new institution is created that is capable of allowing groups of people without legal personality or statute to participate in the decision-making process.
3. The main idea behind the project is to promote the participation of young people, thus eliminating the idea of adult-centeredness. Young people cease to be recipients and become actors in the activities offered to them. Spaces for collective action are created where there is a horizontal conversation, free of prejudice, between the generations of adults and young people.
4. Mandarache is not only a cultural project, but also an educational practice. In addition, it opts for non-formal education methods in the spaces and hours reserved for formal education. In this sense, teachers play the role of mediators between young people and the act of reading. The project recognizes mediation as a transformative action, but also as a way to strengthen the bonds between different cultural actors and books.

5. On a personal note, and to mention something that could improve the project, I would like to suggest implementing a dynamic in which libraries and bookstores could play a more relevant role in the project.

- 5. Reading is understood as a cultural and civic practice. Therefore, it is not limited to the years of academic education, but a learning process that changes throughout life. Reading is learning to read at any age, it is growing through reading. This idea generates an educational framework that provides those who read with the necessary tools to understand reading and literature as something active.
- 6. It is a literary project that, although aimed at young people, does not focus on young adult literature. The selection of books is diverse. It seeks to diversify the view through a wide range of books, with a political conscience focused on the construction of a cultural heritage for the young population. This allows a debate that goes beyond the classroom and has an impact on libraries, adult reading clubs or meetings with authors.

- 7. The importance of the project coordination team in the Concejalía de Juventud to identify and consciously act on the gaps of social, economic and cultural inequality in the population. It is important to promote actions within the project to address these gaps.
- 8. The Mandarache and Hache Awards are just an excuse for the new generations to see themselves as potential professionals in the cultural and literary fields. Proposals such as *Libreta Mandarache*, *Orillas Mandarache* or *Radio Mandarache* open their eyes to new horizons in the field of creation, reflection and participation around books.
- 9. Finally, an idea that runs through the project: literature is a discipline of contemporary art. The Mandarache and Hache Awards do not seek to promote reading as mere entertainment. The project aims to make people understand how important it is to have a critical relationship with books, and how books are connected to the world and human development. This is why it is so important to offer the necessary tools to enjoy the reading of a book and its possibilities for dialog, as an element that generates questions and pleasure, through the legitimate right we all have to access culture.

While writing this guide, I thought about my own need to connect with the literary, to give space to the poetic word in the midst of so much practical information. Then, as an irremediable symptom, I thought of sharing some of the poetic references that I was able to discover through Mandarache. When I met the young people of the podcast Ojos De Perra Azul, they shared with me some of the readings that accompanied them. In one of these shared verses, I discovered the African-American poet June Jordan, who wrote the poem *Calling on All Silent Minorities* in the nineties.

*“Hey
c’mon
come out
wherever you are
We need to have this meeting
at the tree
Ain’even benn
planted
yet.”⁶*

6. Poem by June Jordan from Directed by Desire: *The Complete Poems of June Jordan* (Copper Canyon Press, 2005).

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And well, that was my feeling during the project, that of being gathered under a tree and seeing it grow, with many roots, giving good shade and supported by a strong trunk. However, it was not this first poem that triggered my memory, but one written by Paloma Chen, a young poet from Alicante who, at the age of 22, won the Premio Nacional de Poesía Viva 2020. When she published her first collection of poems, *Invocación a las mayorías silenciosas* (*Calling on All Silent majorities*), the author played with the title of Junes Jordan's poem, which she quotes at the beginning of the book. She proposes a change, a society that, like youth, is also changing. That is why, in one of her poems with the same title as the book, she shares the following lines:

*“I wait for you and the others
yes
for you
for all silent majorities
all of those with border identities
those from the ceasefire
for you
because my home is yours
because my home is never closed”*⁷

7. Chen, Paloma. *Invocación a las mayorías silenciosas*. España: Letraversal, 2022.
Translated into English by Eva Sánchez Martínez



The Mandarache and Hache Awards are a home that is never closed. It pauses, it stops to give space to self-criticism, to rest, but it is still a meeting place for all identities. It is a space that gives a voice to the vast majority of young people who need a place to be and to speak out in society. I know that with these concluding words I am once again reinforcing my admiration, but I do so from the certainty of hope, as a young Paloma Chen did in her poem. It is my hope that this guide will serve to open doors to other homes, in new places, where we can meet, recognize and admire each other.

Freddy Gonçalves Da Silva
Cartagena, December 2024

Thank you for your attention!

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