

BOOKS, READERS AND READING MEDIATORS

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Abstract: *The aim of this communication is to reflect on the topic: Books, Readers and Reading Mediators, highlighting the importance of the latter, namely within the context of pre-school and primary school education. Our reflection will be theoretically grounded on researchers in contemporary children's literature such as: Pedro Cerrillo, Santiago Yubero, Gemma Llunch. Based on experiments carried out by interns that we monitor at the School of Education of Bragança, Portugal, within various contexts of pre-school and primary school education, we will show that the mediator's role is very important both in the promotion and in the dramatization of reading, especially when targeting children, and we will highlight their role as a bridge or link between books and pre-readers and early readers, promoting and facilitating the dialogue between them.*

Keywords: *reading mediators; reading promotion; pre-readers; early readers;*

Introduction

The growing complexity of the social apparatus in post-industrial modern societies has brought about the proliferation of institutions responsible for children and teenagers' education as well as their consequent integration into the adult world.

Since then, the family, considered as the primary institution, has been losing ground in training the human being as a whole to other institutions such as: nurseries, kindergartens, after-school centres, sports or recreation centres, and also school and training centres.

When promoting the dramatization of reading, especially when it is targeted at children or teenagers, the mediator plays a very important role,

usually performed by adults with specific profiles (parents, educators, teachers, librarians). The mediator represents the bridge or link between books and pre or early readers by promoting and facilitating the dialogue between them (Cerrillo *et al.*2007).

The importance of Reading mediators

According to Cerrillo, Yubero and Larrañaga (2007), in order to perform their duty, mediators must meet a set of requirements, cited as follows:

- a) Be a usual reader;
- a) Share and transmit the joy of reading;
- b) Be able to promote participation;
- c) Have some imagination;
- d) Have some literary, psychologic and didactic training (Cerrillo, *op. cit.*, p.278)

Children currently spend few hours with their families and even during that short time, they are affected by interferences from other training sources, namely from the audio-visual means which are now part of any home.

However, we must not forget that parents are the ones who follow and monitor the child most closely before school age, thus giving them the chance to listen to tales and handle books, and making them perceive the beauty of the words and pictures contained in those “magical” objects. Initially, the book may be just a toy, but the presence of parents at the moment when children start their contact with it will lead them to discover their real sense and multiple possibilities.

Such acquaintance with books must happen right from the first months as nowadays books appear in the market in different materials for “small readers”: books made of fabric or plastic, books with sound stimuli, etc.

Later, children learn to flick the pages and that can be understood as a good motor development exercise. The child starts to understand that the speech held by the adult while flicking the illustrated pages gives them information and pleasure. It is important for the adult to guide and monitor the child through their interpretation of pictures, selecting the books according to their needs and expectations.

Pictures are the most appropriate form of language to reading pre-learning, thus the relevance of parents/adults in the selection of good illustration quality books.

The texts that appear in these first books work as guides to narrative and provide the child with the first contact with the written language, enabling them to discover that not only pictures but also written words constitute a source of information. It is from that moment that the child starts discovering, at an unconscious level, that speaking and writing constitute

two different ways of expression. It is then the role of school, as a privileged space to develop their taste for reading, to provide that encounter between books and children, so that the latter can use literature in their understanding of themselves and of what surrounds them since children's literature is responsible for "shaping a new mentality" (Coelho, 2000,p. 18).

2- School and Reading Mediation

Indeed, school education has always been connected to written books for children. Since the origins of this produce, school has sheltered didactic books and organised anthologies of tales and narratives used for teaching reading as well as for moral development. We often forget that children are not "empty" of literary culture when they get to their first official contact with reading, that is, when they start school.

Before learning to read and write, children take part in many events of literary folklore expression, which is part of the spoken chain which intervenes in the reception and sometimes transmission of literary works of oral tradition, some of which are primarily or even solely targeted at children: fairy tales, miming games, prayers, never-ending tales, tongue twisters or riddles (Cerrillo, *op. cit.*,p. 82).

When children get to "official" culture, these are replaced by other texts, transmitted in different ways and which, more often than desirable, result from certain previous conditions which have nothing to do with the literary creation *per se*. We are here referring to the frequent "ordering" of books which tackle a certain topic from a certain point of view, considered to be adequate to the target reader, with such simplicity and plainness that they end up resulting in totally trivial texts.

Children's books have always found in school a safe haven both as compulsory reading material and as a complement to other pedagogical activities or even as a prize to the best students.

Translated into more sophisticated production means and a more effective promotion and dissemination, the economic modernisation has renewed the old ideological-economic alliance between school and the literary production for children. Considering the current concept of children's literature, we can state that its value has been increasing over the last decades. In Portugal, where a network of school libraries has existed for a relatively short time, school has played a particularly active role in this trend.

However, it was mainly from the eighties, when literature potentially targeted at children became generalised within the school context, that the books for children and teenagers became an indispensable element for their reading and literary training. Indeed, the appearance of the notion of "literary competence" (Colomer, 1998) led to the setting of goals for literary

education for the training of a “competent reader” (Colomer, *op. cit.*,p.67) and many teachers adopted youth literature books in which the readers’ competence seemed to build and grow spontaneously.

Nowadays, the promotion of colourful and appealing books for children is directly targeted at teachers since, as mediators, their choice of one or another title is fundamental because the adoption of the book they recommend will considerably increase its sales. Also, the significant increase of the student population has altered the book production and marketing means, favouring the professionalization of children’s books writers. Moreover, the mobilisation of writers towards children and youth audiences is another indicator suggesting the renewal of the alliance between children’s literature and school. Indeed, most writers take part in campaigns and events engaged in promoting reading, they participate in congresses, seminars and symposiums and above all, they visit schools and talk about their works in weeks dedicated to books and reading.

Undeniably, children’s writing is now understood as something which must contribute to the development of the child by giving them pleasure. It is the education professionals’ responsibility (educators and teachers) to select and provide children with literature which enhances their questioning and connects their world to a wider universe.

Currently, the main purpose of children’s literature is to educate readers and contribute to make reading a common habit and practice. Therefore, with the ultimate goal of educating autonomous readers, the main goals of reading mediators are as follows:

- 1.- Create and promote steady reading habits;
- 2.- Help to read for reading;
- 3.- Guide extra-school reading;
- 4.- Coordinate and facilitate reading according to age;
- 5.- Prepare, develop and assess reading dramatizations.

(Adapted from Cerrillo *et al.* ,*op. cit.*,p.278)

Anchored in reading, learning becomes continuous as it provides answers, updating and also leisure, which are part of the basic human needs. Reading can make us laugh, cry, create empathy with some characters, follow the stories plot, transport us into other worlds and give life to our dreams.

Therefore, children’s literature is nowadays considered simultaneously as an important study tool and a way of enjoyment. Through constant reading, we develop a habit which is healthy and above all, a source of knowledge and intellectuality. To some degree, the mediator should be able to legitimise the editorial offer that the market currently provides to early and young readers, making a clear distinction between the reading with and without academic goals, since the first is compulsory and aims to

achieve something more: learning, studying, knowing; while the second is voluntary and aims to entertain and give joy and pleasure.

By developing a reading habit even before or during compulsory education, human beings gain the capacity of expressing, discussing and arguing their point of view since they learn how to interpret and form a line of logical reasoning.

The normative character usually associated with children's literature has now changed. At present, we talk about formative education. School, books and children's literature as well as the relationships and specificities between them are directed towards the individual's development, even when that means to conform to the existing thought.

Through self-strangeness, reflection and analysis, children's literature together with school enable the unbalance and consequent creation of new structures which lead the subject to think critically and elaborate personal opinions. What is written and printed prevails in humans' lives for much longer.

The children (who often first arrive at school without knowing any books or literature) have the opportunity to connect with other possibilities of growth. Therefore, school is the ideal space to establish a relationship between literature, books and children. The preservation of a relationship between literature and school or the use of books inside the classroom results from the fact that both share a common feature: their formative nature. Indeed, both fictional works and educational institutions are engaged in training and forming the individuals they target.

Since it provides a new outlook on reality, children's literature has been gaining ground and relevance within several official documents such as the *Curricular Guidelines for Pre-School Education*, the *National Programme for Basic Education*, namely regarding primary school, or the *Curricular Goals* defined for that education level.

From the restricted world of children, literature has been moving towards being considered to have a scientific status. Besides seeing books as a tool to perform a didactic duty, the academic world has come to see them as a means of enjoyment. The selection of the books to be read at school is made based on the child's perspective, thus enabling the development of readers who enjoy the activity while thinking critically about what they read. Inside the school, literature must have an educational function. However, it oftentimes acts on the individual by blocking personal initiatives. Therefore, the teacher must be able to establish a good relationship between school, literature and books by providing literary works which give children the chance to perceive the social changes taking place in the world, so that they become aware of what happens around them.

It is also very important that higher education, namely teacher training schools, provides opportunities for teachers to acknowledge and promote, near their students who are training to be future educators and teachers, the literary works with aesthetic and literary quality for youth, thus stimulating reading and literature as forms of leisure and enjoyment. In order to educate readers, there is no better way than choosing good books, selected for their ability to transmit messages expressed with accuracy and quality and to emotionally touch and thrill, to make us dream or share something. Fairy tales, for example, perpetuate idealised formats and are moralising. However, they also develop imagination and fantasy, thus contributing to the development of children's creativity and enabling them to create parallel worlds, that is, to go beyond the concrete reality.

As pre-school and primary school teacher trainers, the message we try to get across is that as teachers, we cannot uniquely confine to this literary subgenre. It is necessary to diversify the literary works potentially targeted at children so that the child perceives the wide possibilities of growth. This way, books can contribute to children's personal and intellectual development.

Nowadays, we are aware that children create their own hypothesis about reading and writing, so proximity between the reader and the text is necessary. Also, the literary text opens several reading possibilities, providing the reader with conditions to perceive reality while interacting with reading. Therefore, teachers as mediators must know how to present a text to their students and acknowledge their ways or processes of understanding, always aware that their social or even academic experiences may highly influence their interpretation of the text.

Literature may not be treated as an educational activity only, but also as an activity which helps to disseminate knowledge so that individuals can reflect on their surrounding world, aiming to build knowledge and being. Reading enhances knowledge building and turns the reader subject into an autonomous and aware critic who does not accept everything ready-made. In light of what has been said, it is paramount that the mediator makes a good choice of books.

(...) children's literature offers a field of work equally valuable by reproducing in the works transmitted to children the particularities of artistic creation aiming to interpret the existence which leads human beings towards a wider and more effective understanding of their universe, whatever their age or intellectual, emotional and social circumstances (Zilberman, 1991,p. 69).

This is possible if the educator/teacher uses books in a transformative way, accepting their various interpretations. Indeed, it is in the teacher's hands to provide the student with learning situations which enable

knowledge building, and children's literature is a tool which contributes to the provision of such situations. Therefore, the teacher must be knowledgeable in this important element and also in how to use it in a way that preserves the real function of reading.

Thus, it is convenient that the teacher establishes criteria for the selection of the book to be worked on inside the classroom. Teachers must choose the text according to its adequacy to the reader and aesthetic quality rather than base their choice on the teaching of grammar or compliance rules. Furthermore, other activities must be implemented rather than filling in reading worksheets. Students must be given opportunities to verbalise and share with classmates the emotional and affective reasons why the text may be loved or hated, always respecting the principle that it is the readers themselves who "manage" their activities. Consequently, teachers must value activities which enable children to express: the emotions aroused by the reading; the sensations experienced when reading; the horizons the text opened or the aspects it clarified; the way, innovative or not, in which the topic was tackled, and the intertextual connections it provided.

Children need to read good texts in order to understand literature as a means of thinking about reality and not only as a means of seeing it as something immutable and full of rules to be obeyed. Also, they must perceive literature in a wider way and understand that its goal is not only teaching the language.

Therefore, besides its aesthetic quality, the book's innovative aspect must also be considered, highlighting what we live but do not know. It is relevant to analyse the plot, the characters and the moral values expressed. However, it is also crucial that the main goal when choosing a book is to give birth to a connection between the book and the child which will not easily be broken over time.

3-Some Important Text Typologies

Throughout our lifetime, reading sets the scene for our growth and maturation. When talking about children's literature, the question arises: which type of reading must we provide to the child?

The literary genres were determined in ancient times by Aristotle as: lyric, epic or narrative and dramatic. The lyric includes poems such as elegies, sonnets, odes or melic poetry. The narrative works on fiction, including: tales, fables, novels, myths, legends, among others. The dramatic includes: operas, tragedies, comedies, satyrs, etc.

There are several elements determining the uniqueness of each one of them, however, they are all based on the idea that reality needs to be analysed and questioned as well as discussed, praised and experienced. Therefore, we reiterate the principle that encompassing these various genres, reading must be seen, experienced, spoken, heard and told.

By selecting and providing children with texts from the different literary genres, we are giving them the opportunity to relate to those they have more affinity with. Consequently, it is the teacher's role to offer youngsters: fairy tales, fables, legends, poems and texts to be dramatized. Each one of these types of text provides children with different values which must be born in mind by the teacher. Moral values have changed over time according to the reality we live in and currently, they reflect the following aspects:

- a)** Solidarity spirit, which considers the subject as part of the whole;
- b)** Social system of transformation, giving priority to “being” over “having”;
- c)** Prevalence of a moral of responsibility, in which the subject tries to act conscientiously towards the other;
- d)** Questioning of authority as absolute power;
- e)** Rediscovering the past and valuing the cultural traditions of one's country and region;
- f)** Continuous evolution of life, viewing death as a transformation rather than an ending;
- g)** Anti-racism, a way to acknowledge and harmonise racial differences;
- h)** Viewing the child as a developing being;
- i)** Valuing intuition, breaking down the barriers between concrete reality and imagination;

Unfortunately, many pre-school and primary teachers do not agree with regards to the importance of reading as they do not understand its value. This results in a concrete lack of incentive towards reading.

Fairy tales, for example, continue to be as they were in the past very important for the child's entertainment and development.

According to Bettelheim:

Fairy tales are unmatched not only as a form of literature but also as works of art totally understandable for children like no other form of art. Similarly to real art, the deepest meaning of a fairy tale varies from person to person and it varies for the same person in different moments of their life (Bettelheim, 1999, p. 21).

These tales do not only represent a fantasy imaginary but they also inculcate moralising truths which children observe without questioning. For this reason, it is very important that the teacher perceives and understands the multiple visions of literature in order to discover how the story, candid at first sight, may contain relevant information for the child's holistic development.

4-The Role of Educators/Teachers as Reading Mediators

It is important to highlight the critical and reflective attitude that is necessary for the child's cognitive development. Teachers must stimulate students'

reflective reading. Thus, critical thinking and reflection are present in the school activities but without the loss of fantasy and imagination present in fables and tales.

Literature must be present and be part of the child's cultural environment. Books must meet their tastes and curiosities, bringing author and readers closer and enabling the child to get acquainted with the marvellous world or literary creation. We must highlight that reading is a continuous learning process and school must operate in the sense of awaking children's interest in it. Therefore, teachers must help develop students' freedom of choice regarding their own readings.

The ideal of literature is to delight, entertain, instruct and educate children, and better when the four are achieved at once. Pleasure must involve the rest. If there is no art that produces pleasure, then it is not a literary work but a didactic one (Góes, 1991, p.22). School, educators and teachers must create a common path in order to reflect and build new hypothesis regarding the introduction of reading in the school environment, thus developing in children the ability to think, create and recreate their own readings.

In most pre-primary and primary schools, there is now a visible commitment to stimulating and encouraging children to get acquainted with diversified readings and express their ideas, enabling them to read and re-read pleurably (either through a mediator or autonomously), constantly interact with the text and even become part of it.

Marisa Lajolo presents the following activities to awake and develop children's love of reading:

Transforming the text into a play script and subsequent staging; reproducing the book motif, plot or characters in posters or drawings; creating objects or collages related to the story from waste; researching in order to deepen some issue raised in the text; continuing the story or rewriting it from a different point of view; performing interviews (real or simulated) with the author or characters of the book; dramatizing or reciting poems individually or in group (...) (Lajolo, 2005, p. 70).

This author also reflects on the importance of the fact that teachers are readers themselves, adding that many of them are "little acquainted with books and do not question their own poor quantitative and qualitative reading" (*Idem, ibidem*, p. 72). Marisa Lajolo considers that the vast majority of governmental institutions worldwide have been implementing a reading policy anchored in a fast and shallow dissemination. According to the author, this not only disengages governments from their responsibilities regarding education quality, but also reinforces the reproductive character of school, as this releases teachers from the responsibility to choose and plan the readings

they will develop in class based on their own readings and discussions held with students. As a solution to this problem, we corroborate her words:

Teachers may, *voluntarily*, select those in which they most believe and discard others, reformulate them all according to what they know about their students and their reading, to what they know about language and literature, to what they understand by education, reading and writing, and particularly, according to what they understand by teaching Portuguese (...) (Lajolo, *op.cit.*, p 7).

Libraries are learning laboratories and therefore, one of the most privileged spaces for the reading time or “Storytelling Time”¹, where two essential aspects are observed for the child’s development regarding the habit of reading: listening to stories and playing. The interaction of the magical world of children’s literature with playfulness transforms the storytelling time into a universe of fantasy, where imagination is the main passport to this trip. Teachers must be aware that by telling stories, they will influence the process of construction of reader students and critical students, who will be able to interpret the different views of the world and use their readings to understand their own inner world.

Nowadays, teachers must transform their working space in view to the creation of a stimulating and pleasant environment, thus enabling children to freely express their understanding and interrogations when reading literary texts. Educators and teachers must not only encourage children to enjoy being in contact with books but also tell them stories, thus creating an atmosphere of affection and closeness between children and books. It is the teacher’s reading which leads to the students’ active participation by asking questions, commenting and interpreting the stories orally. This magical moment of listening to stories is highly significant for the student.

Whenever possible, teachers must vary the themes of the stories they tell or give students to read, thus developing their logical thinking, imagination, vocabulary, syntax, etc. At the reading time, we feel that the children believe the author is someone very special, unattainable, with an unmatched intelligence. Consequence? Distance and detachment. Solution? Give children opportunities to contact with book writers, thus leading them to see authors as common people living in the same society as them and to become more interested in the fantastic world of reading.

Another aspect of the “Storytelling Time” is that when we tell children a story, we use a structure that is specific to spoken language and

1 The “Storytelling Time” encourages the child to develop a love and habit of reading and widens the reading horizons, making the child aware of the multiplicity of books including a diversity of topics, genres and styles, capable of meeting their individual needs and tastes.

may include other elements besides the verbal components: gestures, intonation, pausing... When we read the story from the book, we use structures which are grammatically organised and are specific to written language. When reading, we can perceive children's reactions and correct, modify, re-read, explain and complement the story.

Final Considerations

The more contact children have with children's literature, the better prepared they will be to express their thoughts in a clear way. By listening to a story, children learn to put themselves in other people's shoes and consequently understand different points of view. They learn to know the power of words to generate actions and arouse feelings. They realise that through language, they can influence others' thoughts and assert their own point of view. Children develop an internal language that enables them to raise hypothesis and prepare to argue and counter-argue. Therefore, it is gratifying for teachers to feel and realise that their students were drawn to reading and that through their work, they helped develop potential creative and critical readers, capable of reading and re-reading, analysing and interpreting any type of text, be it a pedagogical or didactic text or a leisure one.

These are the moments of reading and/or narration which lead us to travel, transform, seek, build and rebuild our whole trajectory of life:

Reading contributes decisively to fill in the gap in the training and development of human beings. It develops reflection and critical thinking. It is an inexhaustible source of topics to better understand oneself and the world. It provides internal growth. It leads us to experience the most varied emotions, enabling the formation of individual parameters that measure and code our own feelings (Cagneti, 1986, p. 25).

It is in light of this statement that teachers must reconsider the importance of reading, valuing the child as an eternal learner, capable of creating, recreating, interpreting and formulating hypothesis about what is read to them as well as what they read or write. School must have a proposal to raise not only good readers but also conscientious, autonomous and critical citizens. When reading a book, the teacher must analyse its content and make one or several interpretations. Another aspect that the teacher must bear in mind is that reading is an important means to attain knowledge and that what matters is not the amount read but the depth of the knowledge attained.

According to Coelho, children's literature has become "one of the fields in question where seeds are being sowed of values which will undoubtedly integrate a new future mentality" (Coelho, 2000, p.19).

In light of this statement, it is the teacher's duty to be alert towards the transformations occurring at the present time in order to recognise and permanently update their own knowledge, always targeting three points: "literature (as an attentive reader), the surrounding reality (as an aware citizen), and teaching (as a competent professional)" (Coelho, *op. cit.*, p.18). In a nutshell, the pleasure of reading represents the first step towards a learning that may be arid or repetitive at times but that will give the child the power to conquer, alone and acutely, the meaning and sense of a text, and in this process, reading mediators play a central and essential role.

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