

IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE CRUCIBLE OF THE WORLD OF STORIES: THE FORMATIVE VALUES OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN BILINGUAL COMMUNICATION CONTEXTS

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Abstract: *Children's literature occupies a unique position at the intersection of language development, emotional growth, and identity formation. Within bilingual educational contexts, literary narratives may acquire additional significance, functioning as pedagogical resources and as symbolic spaces in which linguistic belonging and cultural continuity are negotiated. This article examines the formative value of children's literature through a theoretical and applied perspective that integrates narrative theory, developmental psychology, communication studies, and bilingual education. Drawing upon the works of Bruner, Vygotsky, Bettelheim, Nikolajeva, Cummins, and Krashen, the study explores the role of literary narratives in supporting meaning-making, emotional externalization, communicative development, and identity construction. Particular attention is devoted to Romanian minority education in Hungary, where children's literature may contribute to the development of an affective relationship with Romanian as a heritage language. The theoretical discussion is complemented by a case study based on the literary narrative "A Carriage of One's Own", (Birescu Iacob & Olteanu-Sturza, 2025), selected from the volume "Stories from Romanian Homes", illustrating how the same story may generate different forms of participation, interpretation, and identity work across developmental stages. The findings suggest that the educational value of children's literature resides not primarily in the transmission of cultural content, but in its capacity to create symbolic environments where communication, emotion, and belonging become*

interconnected. Within such environments, identity is not directly taught, but gradually constructed through meaningful narrative experience.

Keywords: *children's literature; identity formation; bilingual education; communication development; narrative engagement; heritage language; emotional development; Romanian minority education; storytelling.*

Introduction

Contemporary childhood unfolds within increasingly complex communicative environments. Children are exposed to unprecedented quantities of information, yet opportunities for sustained dialogue, reflective interaction, and emotionally meaningful communication appear progressively fragmented. Educational institutions are therefore confronted with a challenge that extends beyond the development of literacy skills: how can children be supported in constructing meaningful relationships with language, with others, and with themselves? Within this context, children's literature deserves renewed scholarly attention. While traditionally associated with literacy development and aesthetic education, literary narratives perform functions that reach far beyond reading instruction. Stories provide symbolic frameworks through which children interpret experiences, explore emotions, negotiate relationships, and gradually construct personal and social identities. The world of stories functions as a space where reality may be examined from a position of safety, distance, and imagination.

Our article approaches children's literature not primarily as a literary artifact, but as a formative environment. Its central premise is that narratives create conditions under which communication, emotional experience, and identity formation become mutually reinforcing processes. From this perspective, the educational significance of storytelling lies less in the transmission of predetermined messages and more in the opportunities it creates for participation, interpretation, reflection, and self-understanding. This acquires particular relevance in bilingual educational contexts. For children belonging to linguistic minority communities, language represents more than a communicative instrument; it is also a carrier of memory, belonging, and cultural continuity. Consequently, educational practices that foster meaningful engagement with the heritage language may contribute to linguistic development as well as to the formation of positive linguistic identities. In the context of Romanian minority education in Hungary, literary narratives can create emotionally significant encounters with

Romanian, transforming the language from an object of instruction into a medium of experience.

The article is organized around three interconnected objectives. First, it examines the theoretical foundations that explain the formative potential of children's literature from cognitive, emotional, communicative, and socio-cultural perspectives. Second, it explores the pedagogical mechanisms through which narrative engagement may be transformed into meaningful educational experience. Third, it illustrates these processes through an applied case study, centred on the literary narrative "A Carriage of One's Own", analysed across different developmental stages. The argument advanced throughout the article is that children's literature contributes to identity formation not through direct cultural transmission, but through the creation of emotionally meaningful narrative experiences in which language, belonging, and self-understanding become interconnected. The applied dimension of the study is illustrated through the analysis of "A Carriage of One's Own" (Birescu Iacob & Olteanu-Sturza, 2025), a literary narrative selected from the volume "Stories from Romanian Homes".

The story as a formative space. Theoretical background

The formative function of storytelling

Stories occupy a distinctive place in children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. Beyond their entertainment value, narratives provide symbolic frameworks through which children interpret reality, negotiate meanings, and construct coherent representations of themselves and others. The formative power of children's literature lies in its capacity to organize experience into meaningful structures that can be understood, remembered, and emotionally appropriated.

Jerome Bruner viewed narrative as one of the fundamental modes through which human beings make sense of the world. According to Bruner (1990), narrative thinking allows individuals to organize experiences into sequences of actions, intentions, and consequences, thereby facilitating the construction of personal and social meaning. As he argues, "we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative" (Bruner, 1990, p. 4). Through repeated encounters with stories, children gradually acquire narrative schemas that help them understand relationships, motives, conflicts, and moral choices.

From a developmental perspective, stories function as mediating tools situated within the socio-cultural environment described by Vygotsky. Learning does not occur in isolation; it emerges through interaction, dialogue, and shared cultural symbols. Literary narratives offer precisely such symbolic resources. Characters, events, and conflicts

become cultural instruments through which children explore perspectives that extend beyond their immediate experience. In this sense, literature contributes to the internalization of social norms, communicative practices, and value systems. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that higher psychological functions first appear on the social zone before becoming internalized by the individual, a process that is particularly visible during collective reading activities and guided literary discussions.

The emotional dimension of storytelling has been extensively explored by Bettelheim. In his influential work on fairy tales, he argues that stories help children confront fears, anxieties, and internal conflicts within a symbolic and psychologically safe environment. As Bettelheim (1976) notes, fairy tales address “universal human problems” and provide symbolic pathways through which children can process emotional tensions (p. 8). The child does not just listen to a story; rather, he or she enters an imaginative space where emotions can be explored without the risks associated with real-life experiences. This symbolic distance enables reflection, emotional regulation, and the gradual development of resilience.

Beyond organizing experience, narratives contribute to the construction of personal identity. According to McAdams (2023), individuals develop a sense of self through internalized and evolving life stories that provide coherence and meaning across time. Recent scholarship has further highlighted the role of literature in fostering empathy and emotional understanding. Nikolajeva (2014) argues that children's fiction offers readers opportunities to access the inner worlds of characters, thereby stimulating perspective-taking and emotional engagement. Literary texts invite children to consider how others think, feel, and respond to challenges. Such experiences contribute to the development of empathic understanding and social cognition, competencies that are increasingly recognized as essential for successful interpersonal communication and participation in diverse communities. As Nikolajeva (2014) observes, reading fiction may function as “a simulator of social experience” (p. 91), allowing children to rehearse emotional and relational scenarios in a protected context.

The formative function of storytelling therefore extends across multiple developmental domains. Narratives cultivate imagination, support emotional regulation, encourage empathic understanding, and facilitate the internalization of cultural meanings. They provide children with symbolic models through which identity can be explored and negotiated. In this regard, stories may be understood not simply as educational resources but as developmental environments in their own

right – spaces where language, emotion, cognition, and social experience converge in the ongoing formation of the self.

Storytelling and the development of communication

Communication develops within meaningful social interactions. Children do not acquire language just through exposure to vocabulary and grammatical structures; they learn to communicate by participating in situations that require interpretation, negotiation of meaning, emotional expression, and social engagement. Storytelling constitutes one of the most complex communicative environments available in early childhood education. Unlike isolated language exercises, literary narratives integrate cognitive, emotional, and relational dimensions into a coherent communicative act. Stories invite children to listen, predict, question, explain, interpret, and respond. Through these processes, language becomes a medium for constructing meaning rather than an object of instruction. The educational value of storytelling therefore lies not only in what children hear, but also in what they are encouraged to say, imagine, and discuss.

Bruner (1986) emphasizes that meaning emerges through participation in culturally situated acts of interpretation. Storytelling creates precisely such contexts. During shared reading activities, children engage in dialogues that require them to infer intentions, reconstruct causal relationships, and articulate personal viewpoints. The story becomes a common symbolic space within which communication acquires purpose and relevance. Rather than answering questions for evaluation, children are invited to contribute interpretations, formulate hypotheses, and explore alternative perspectives.

From the perspective of language acquisition, Krashen's theory of comprehensible input offers an important explanatory framework. According to Krashen (1985), language develops most effectively when learners are exposed to meaningful input that is slightly beyond their current level of competence but remains understandable through contextual support. Literary narratives naturally provide such conditions. Illustrations, recurring structures, emotional cues, and familiar situations support comprehension while simultaneously introducing new linguistic forms. Stories therefore facilitate language growth without transforming communication into a purely instructional exercise. Equally significant is the emotional dimension of language learning. Communication does not occur independently of affective experience. Krashen's notion of the affective filter suggests that anxiety, insecurity, or fear of error may inhibit language acquisition. Storytelling often lowers these barriers. Children are generally willing to discuss the feelings of a character before they are prepared to discuss

their own emotions. Stories create opportunities for authentic communication while reducing the pressure associated with direct personal disclosure.

The development of oral expression is closely connected to these processes. Literary discussions encourage children to formulate complete utterances, justify opinions, describe emotional states, and negotiate interpretations. Over time, such interactions contribute to the expansion of active vocabulary and the refinement of communicative competence. Particular importance should be attributed to emotional vocabulary. Research consistently indicates that the ability to identify and verbalize emotional experiences supports both social adaptation and self-regulation. Through stories, children encounter a rich repertoire of emotional concepts that gradually become available for personal use. Emotional literacy involves not only the recognition of emotions but also the ability to communicate them effectively within social interactions (Denham, 2023). Literary narratives provide contexts in which such competencies may develop naturally through dialogue and reflection.

The relationship between language, identity, and educational participation has been highlighted by several scholars working within minority educational contexts. Discussing school adaptation in relation to minority identity, Olteanu (2015) emphasizes the importance of psychological and cultural factors that shape children's sense of belonging within educational environments. Such perspectives reinforce the view that linguistic development cannot be separated from broader processes of identity construction and social participation.

The dialogic potential of storytelling is especially relevant from the perspective of Cummins' distinction between basic interpersonal communicative skills and cognitively demanding language use. Literary conversations frequently move beyond everyday communication and invite children to engage in explanation, interpretation, comparison, and reflection. In doing so, they support the development of higher-order language abilities that are essential for later academic success (Cummins, 2000). Furthermore, storytelling contributes to the emergence of reflective communication. Questions such as "Why did the character act in this way?", "What could have happened differently?", or "How would you feel in this situation?" require children to move beyond simple description. They encourage metacognitive engagement and foster the ability to examine thoughts, emotions, and actions from multiple perspectives. Such communicative practices gradually transform language into an instrument of reflection. Storytelling should be viewed as a multidimensional communicative

practice through which children learn to participate in dialogue, express emotions, construct meanings, and position themselves within a social world. Language development and identity development thus become inseparable processes, mediated through narrative experience.

Storytelling in Romanian-Hungarian bilingual contexts: language, identity, and emotional belonging

The educational significance of children's literature acquires additional dimensions within bilingual minority communities, where language functions not only as a means of communication, but also as a marker of cultural continuity and collective identity. In the case of the Romanian community in Hungary, the preservation and transmission of the Romanian language represent educational, cultural, and symbolic challenges that extend beyond the boundaries of formal language instruction. Children growing up in bilingual environments frequently navigate multiple linguistic and cultural systems simultaneously. Their linguistic repertoire develops through continuous interaction between majority and minority languages, often resulting in unequal patterns of language use across different social domains. While Hungarian may dominate public life and peer interactions, Romanian often occupies more restricted communicative spaces, associated primarily with family traditions, cultural events, or institutional educational contexts. Under such circumstances, the question is no longer whether children learn Romanian, but how they develop an emotional relationship with the language. This distinction is essential. A language can be learned without becoming a meaningful component of personal identity. Conversely, a language associated with emotionally significant experiences tends to be retained, valued, and actively used across developmental stages. Children's literature contributes precisely to this process by transforming language from an educational requirement into a lived experience. Stories create emotionally charged contexts in which words become attached to characters, memories, relationships, and values. The language of the story gradually becomes the language of belonging. This distinction is particularly relevant in Romanian minority communities in Hungary. Research conducted among Romanian families in Mékerek indicates that bilingualism is sustained not only through formal educational structures but also through affective, familial, and cultural practices that shape children's relationship with language (Birescu, 2024). The study further suggests that linguistic continuity depends on the capacity of educational institutions to transform language from a curricular object into a meaningful medium of communication and belonging.

Cummins (2001) argues that language learning cannot be separated from questions of identity and social affirmation. Educational environments that validate learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds contribute not only to academic achievement but also to the development of positive self-concepts. As Cummins notes, “human relationships are at the heart of schooling” (2001, p. 16). This observation is particularly relevant in minority-language education, where linguistic practices often carry symbolic meanings connected to heritage, community, and intergenerational continuity. Recent research in heritage language education emphasizes that linguistic maintenance depends not solely on formal instruction but also on opportunities for meaningful emotional and cultural engagement with the language (Guardado, 2024). From this perspective, storytelling may be understood as a form of identity mediation. Literary narratives expose children to cultural symbols, traditional values, collective memories, and culturally specific forms of expression. Through repeated encounters with stories, children gradually internalize not only linguistic structures but also cultural narratives that contribute to the formation of identity. The process is subtle. Children do not consciously acquire identity from stories; rather, they encounter themselves within symbolic worlds that reflect aspects of their linguistic and cultural heritage.

Contemporary approaches to bilingual education further emphasize the dynamic interaction between languages. The concept of translanguaging challenges traditional views of bilingualism based on strict language separation and instead recognizes the flexible use of the entire linguistic repertoire of bilingual speakers (García & Wei, 2014). Contemporary translanguaging scholarship increasingly views bilingual communication as a dynamic process through which speakers mobilize their full linguistic repertoire in the construction of meaning (García & Otheguy, 2023). Within literary activities, children naturally move between languages, drawing on all available linguistic resources to construct meaning. Such practices should not be interpreted as deficiencies but as manifestations of bilingual competence. At the same time, children's literature can support what Cummins describes as additive bilingualism, a process through which the acquisition of a second language does not occur at the expense of the first. When Romanian-language stories are associated with positive emotions, successful communication, creativity, and interpersonal connection, they strengthen children's willingness to use Romanian in authentic situations. The language ceases to function exclusively as a school subject and becomes a medium through which experiences, emotions, and personal meanings are expressed. An equally important aspect

concerns linguistic anxiety. In minority-language educational settings, some children may hesitate to communicate in Romanian due to limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, or reduced exposure outside educational institutions. Storytelling often diminishes such barriers. The focus shifts from linguistic accuracy to shared meaning-making. Children participate because they wish to discuss a character, interpret a situation, or imagine an alternative ending. Communication emerges naturally from engagement with the narrative rather than from external linguistic demands. Children's literature performs multiple functions within Romanian minority education in Hungary. It supports language development, facilitates emotional expression, encourages intercultural dialogue, and strengthens symbolic attachment to the heritage language. Most importantly, it creates a space in which communication, identity, and belonging intersect. Within the world of stories, Romanian becomes more than a language that children are expected to learn. It becomes a language through which they can imagine, remember, relate, and ultimately understand themselves.

From story reception to story participation: a pedagogy of narrative engagement

Dialogic reading as a process of meaning construction

The educational value of children's literature resides not primarily in the narrative itself, but in the quality of the interactions that emerge around it. A story becomes formative when it ceases to be an object of passive reception and is transformed into a shared space of interpretation. Dialogic reading represents a significant shift from traditional approaches centred on reproduction and comprehension toward pedagogical practices focused on meaning-making. Within a dialogic framework, children are not expected merely to understand what happened in a story. They are invited to explore why events unfold in particular ways, how characters interpret situations, and what alternative perspectives might exist. Meaning is not transmitted from the text to the reader; it is negotiated through interaction. This understanding resonates with Bruner's conception of learning as an interpretative activity situated within cultural contexts (Bruner, 1996). Questions occupy a central role in this process. However, their educational significance depends less on correctness than on openness. Questions such as "Why do you think the character acted this way?", "What would you have done differently?", or "How might the story continue?" encourage children to move beyond factual recall and engage in reflective communication. The narrative becomes a framework through which thought is verbalized and negotiated.

The dialogic dimension of storytelling is particularly relevant in bilingual educational settings. Because literary discussions are anchored in meaningful content, children often participate more willingly than in decontextualized language exercises. Communication emerges from engagement with the narrative world itself. Dialogic reading constitutes the pedagogical mechanism through which narrative experience becomes educationally productive.

Narrative externalization of emotions

One of the most remarkable functions of storytelling lies in its capacity to facilitate emotional expression through symbolic displacement. Children frequently find it easier to speak about the emotions of a character than about their own feelings. The narrative thus provides a protective intermediary between personal experience and verbal expression. This process may be understood as a form of emotional externalization. Feelings that are difficult to articulate directly become accessible through discussion of fictional situations. Fear, jealousy, loneliness, disappointment, or exclusion can be explored within the symbolic universe of the story before they are recognized within personal experience. The narrative creates sufficient distance to allow reflection while preserving emotional relevance. Children gradually learn to differentiate between emotional states, identify their causes, and discuss possible responses. Language becomes a tool for understanding experience rather than merely describing it. The pedagogical objective is not therapeutic intervention. Rather, it is the cultivation of reflective capacities that enable children to recognize and communicate emotions in socially meaningful ways. This transition from feeling to verbalization represents a critical dimension of communicative competence. Children who can name and discuss emotions are better equipped to participate in social relationships, negotiate conflicts, and develop self-regulatory strategies.

Symbolic and metaphorical mediation in story-based activities

Stories rarely communicate their educational value through explicit messages. Their formative potential emerges through symbols, metaphors, and narrative images that allow complex experiences to be approached indirectly. Children often understand symbolic meanings long before they are capable of explaining them analytically. For this reason, pedagogical work with literature should preserve rather than eliminate ambiguity. Excessive explanation risks reducing narratives to moral lessons and limiting opportunities for personal interpretation. Symbolic elements invite children to participate actively in meaning

construction by connecting narrative situations with their own experiences and understandings.

Metaphor-based activities further support this interpretive process. Visual images, metaphor cards, symbolic drawings, role play, and alternative endings help children reinterpret and reshape narrative meanings through different forms of expression. In these contexts, language works together with images, movement, gestures, emotions, and imagination, creating rich multimodal learning experiences. Children are not passive listeners; they actively take part in meaning-making through interpretation, reflection, and creative response. This multimodal approach supports reading competence, critical thinking, empathy, and creative expression. By combining verbal, visual, and experiential forms of communication, literary texts gain new educational value and become spaces for interdisciplinary exploration, personal meaning-making, and aesthetic engagement.

Such approaches are particularly relevant in bilingual contexts, where symbolic communication may temporarily compensate for linguistic limitations. Children are often capable of expressing sophisticated interpretations through visual or dramatic forms before they can formulate them verbally. Symbolic mediation therefore expands opportunities for participation while simultaneously supporting language development.

The educational significance of these practices lies not in creativity alone. Their primary function is interpretative. They allow children to inhabit the symbolic space of the story and to negotiate personal meanings within it. The relationship between symbolic interpretation and creativity is particularly significant in bilingual contexts, where children frequently mobilize multiple linguistic and cognitive resources in the construction of meaning. Previous research suggests that bilingual environments may support creative forms of expression and flexible thinking, both of which are activated through narrative and metaphorical engagement (Birescu, 2021).

Developmental adaptation: from embodied experience to reflective interpretation

The same story may generate profoundly different forms of engagement depending on the developmental stage of the participants. Narrative meaning evolves alongside cognitive, emotional, and communicative development. Pedagogical adaptation should concern not the story itself but the nature of the interaction constructed around it.

In early childhood, narrative engagement is predominantly embodied. Children respond through gesture, facial expression, movement,

imitation, and play. Stories are experienced through action before they become objects of reflection. Educational activities therefore emphasize role-play, emotional identification, dramatization, and sensory participation.

During the primary school years, narrative engagement becomes increasingly dialogic. Children begin to justify opinions, compare perspectives, evaluate actions, and propose alternative solutions. The story functions as a social text through which interpersonal relationships and moral choices can be examined.

Adolescents approach narratives differently. Their attention often shifts from actions to meanings, from events to symbols, and from characters to questions of identity. Stories become opportunities for exploring belonging, difference, autonomy, and self-understanding. Literary discussion acquires a reflective and interpretative character that extends beyond the immediate narrative.

This developmental progression suggests that educational work with literature should not be organized around fixed activities but around evolving forms of participation. The same narrative may support emotional recognition in preschool children, interpersonal reflection in primary school students, and identity exploration in adolescents. Its educational value resides precisely in this capacity for reinterpretation. The pedagogical transformation of narrative into experience is therefore not a single method, but a developmental process. Stories accompany children across different stages of growth, because they continuously offer new possibilities for understanding themselves and the world around them.

Metaphorical mediation through associative visual cards

Building on theories of literary reception, narrative empathy, and creativity, our study proposes the Triadic Model of Fairy Tale Reception (TRECS – Symbol, Empathy, Creativity). The model conceptualizes the reception of literary texts as an integrated process in which children decode the symbols and narrative functions of fairy tales, identify emotionally with the characters, and creatively reconstruct the narrative world through various forms of expression. Within this framework, associative visual cards function as mediating tools between text, image, and the child's personal experience. This shows the theoretical foundation, the original contribution, and the practical educational value of the study.

Metaphorical mediation through associative visual cards offers an innovative way to support children's symbolic, emotional, and creative engagement with literary texts. By linking visual imagery with narrative functions inspired by Propp's morphology of the folktale, the

cards act as mediators between the story, the image, and the child's personal experience (Propp, 1968). In this process, reading becomes an active form of meaning-making, supporting symbolic thinking, empathy, narrative competence, and creative reinterpretation (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Within the Triadic Model of Fairy Tale Reception, metaphorical cards activate three levels of literary reception: symbolic interpretation, empathic identification, and creative reconstruction. They help children recognize narrative symbols, connect emotionally with characters, and recreate story meanings through storytelling, drawing, dramatization, or digital creation. Thus, associative visual cards link literary understanding with personal expression and support the development of active, reflective, and creative readers.

Case study: "A carriage of one's own" as a pedagogical space of identity formation

The narrative

The present case study is based on "A Carriage of One's Own" (Birescu Iacob & Olteanu-Sturza, 2025), a literary narrative published in the collection "Stories from Romanian Homes", conceived as a resource for language development, emotional education, and intercultural dialogue within Romanian-speaking communities. For the purposes of the present study, the narrative "A Carriage of One's Own" was selected as an illustrative case, due to its symbolic structure and its suitability for developmental reinterpretation across age groups. The literary narrative "A Carriage of One's Own" serves as an illustrative example of how children's literature can function simultaneously as a communicative, emotional, and identity-forming environment. The story revolves around a symbolic image that is immediately accessible to children: the idea of having one's own carriage, a personal space that can be imagined, inhabited, modified, protected, and shared. At a superficial level, the narrative may be read as a story about ownership, personal preferences, or individual choices. However, its educational potential emerges from a deeper symbolic structure. The carriage gradually becomes a metaphor for the self. It represents personal boundaries, emotional security, individuality, and the need for belonging. The narrative does not impose explicit moral lessons. Instead, it invites readers to explore questions concerning autonomy, relationships, acceptance, and self-definition. This symbolic openness is pedagogically significant. Narratives characterized by a single, predetermined interpretation tend to generate limited opportunities for reflection. By contrast, stories that accommodate multiple levels of

meaning allow children of different ages to engage with the same text in developmentally appropriate ways. The educational value of "A Carriage of One's Own" resides precisely in its capacity to support successive reinterpretations across different stages of development. The story therefore provides a suitable framework for examining a central argument of this article: the formative value of children's literature depends not only on narrative content but also on the ways in which narrative meanings are reconstructed through pedagogical interaction.

Preschool children: identity through embodied experience

For preschool children, literary narratives are experienced primarily through action, emotion, and imagination. At this developmental stage, abstract concepts such as identity, autonomy, or personal boundaries are not yet available as explicit categories of reflection. Nevertheless, children engage with these ideas through embodied forms of participation. Within educational activities based on "A Carriage of One's Own", preschool children tend to focus on concrete and emotionally meaningful aspects of the narrative. They identify with characters, imitate actions, express preferences, and respond affectively to situations of inclusion or exclusion. The symbolic carriage is rarely interpreted as a metaphor. Instead, it becomes a tangible object of imagination through which children project wishes, fears, and experiences. Such responses should not be regarded as simplistic. Developmental research consistently demonstrates that symbolic play constitutes an important mechanism through which children explore social roles and construct early forms of self-understanding. Through dramatic play, role-taking, and narrative reenactment, children begin to distinguish between self and other, personal desires and social expectations, individual perspectives and collective experiences.

Particularly significant is the emotional dimension of these interactions. Discussions centred on the narrative frequently encourage children to articulate preferences, describe feelings, and negotiate interpersonal situations. Questions concerning who may enter the carriage, who remains outside, or how characters feel in different situations often generate spontaneous conversations about friendship, fairness, belonging, and acceptance.

From a communicative perspective, these interactions create meaningful opportunities for language use. Children are motivated to speak because communication serves an immediate purpose within the narrative context. Language becomes a tool for expressing intentions, emotions, and interpretations rather than an isolated educational objective. At this stage, the story functions primarily as a space of

emotional recognition. Children encounter themselves in the narrative not through conceptual reflection but through experience. Identity emerges as participation rather than interpretation, as emotional engagement rather than conscious self-analysis.

Primary school children: identity through interpersonal reflection

A significant shift occurs during the primary school years. Children no longer engage exclusively with the emotional experiences of characters; they begin to examine relationships, intentions, consequences, and social dynamics. Narrative participation becomes increasingly reflective. In discussions generated by "A Carriage of One's Own", pupils frequently move beyond questions of personal preference and focus on interpersonal issues. Who should be allowed into the carriage? Can personal space coexist with friendship? What responsibilities accompany ownership? Why do some characters feel excluded while others feel accepted? Such questions transform the narrative into a platform for examining social relationships. The symbolic carriage gradually evolves into a shared social space. Children explore cooperation, reciprocity, fairness, and inclusion through the actions of fictional characters. Importantly, these discussions do not require direct self-disclosure. The narrative provides a protective distance that enables children to express opinions and emotions that might otherwise remain unspoken.

From a communicative perspective, the story stimulates increasingly complex language use. Children compare viewpoints, justify interpretations, formulate hypotheses, and negotiate meanings with peers. Literary discussion becomes an exercise in dialogic thinking. Communication is no longer limited to describing events; it becomes a process of constructing and defending interpretations. At this stage, the narrative also contributes to the development of perspective-taking. Children learn that different readers may understand the same story differently and that multiple interpretations can coexist. Such experiences are particularly valuable in multilingual and multicultural educational environments, where understanding alternative perspectives constitutes an important social competence.

Adolescents: identity through symbolic interpretation

For adolescents, the educational value of "A Carriage of One's Own" resides primarily in its symbolic potential. The narrative ceases to function merely as a story about a character and becomes an opportunity for reflecting on broader questions of identity, autonomy, belonging, and self-definition. Interpretations frequently move beyond the literal narrative framework. The carriage may be understood as a

metaphor for personal boundaries, emotional privacy, individual freedom, or the search for a place within a community. Adolescents often recognize tensions embedded in the narrative: the desire to belong while preserving individuality, the need for connection alongside the need for autonomy, and the negotiation between personal identity and social expectations. These themes are particularly relevant during a developmental period characterized by intense identity formation. Literary narratives provide symbolic material through which adolescents can explore questions that are often difficult to address directly. The discussion is no longer centred on the character alone. It becomes a discussion about the self.

The interpretative openness of the narrative is crucial in this regard. Because the story does not impose a single moral conclusion, it encourages reflection rather than compliance. Adolescents are invited to construct meanings rather than reproduce them. The educational process therefore shifts from emotional recognition toward critical self-positioning.

Within bilingual educational contexts, an additional dimension emerges. Narrative reflection often becomes intertwined with questions of linguistic and cultural belonging. Discussions concerning personal space, identity, and community can create opportunities for adolescents to reflect on their own experiences as members of a linguistic minority. In such moments, literature functions not only as an educational resource but also as a medium through which cultural identity may be explored and articulated.

Pedagogical implications and observations

The analysis of "A Carriage of One's Own" demonstrates that the educational value of children's literature cannot be reduced to the transmission of moral messages or the development of reading skills. The same narrative generated qualitatively different forms of engagement across developmental stages, supporting emotional recognition in preschool children, interpersonal reflection in primary school pupils, and symbolic identity work in adolescents.

Several pedagogical observations emerged consistently throughout the implementation of narrative-based activities. First, literary engagement increased the willingness of participants to communicate. Discussions were characterized by higher levels of spontaneity and involvement than those typically observed in decontextualized language exercises. Children and adolescents spoke because they wished to share interpretations, express emotions, and negotiate meanings.

Second, narrative participation contributed to the expansion of emotional vocabulary. Literary discussion encouraged the verbalization

of experiences that often remain implicit in everyday communication. Participants gradually developed greater precision in describing emotions, motivations, and interpersonal situations. Third, the narrative context appeared to reduce communicative anxiety. Because attention was directed toward fictional situations rather than personal performance, participants engaged more freely in discussion and interpretation. The story functioned as a symbolic intermediary that facilitated communication without placing the individual at the centre of evaluation. Finally, in the context of Romanian minority education in Hungary, literary narratives created meaningful opportunities for the use of Romanian as a language of reflection, imagination, and personal expression. The language was not experienced solely as an object of instruction but as a medium through which emotionally significant experiences could be communicated and interpreted.

These observations support the central argument of the present study. The formative value of children's literature lies not primarily in narrative content itself, but in its capacity to create symbolic environments where communication, emotion, and identity become interconnected. The story functions simultaneously as a linguistic space, an emotional space, and a space of belonging. Within this intersection, identity is not taught; it is gradually constructed.

While literary narratives provide the symbolic framework for identity work and communicative engagement, additional interpretative instruments may deepen children's reflective participation. The following section explores the pedagogical use of metaphorical cards as mediating tools situated at the intersection of narrative interpretation, emotional expression, and identity formation. Within the TRECS model of fairy-tale reception, metaphorical cards function as catalysts of symbolic understanding, empathic identification, and creative transformation, facilitating a more active and personalized engagement with literary texts. This creates a clear transition from theory to pedagogical practice.

It shows that metaphorical cards are not just extra classroom materials, but meaningful tools that deepen children's reflection, emotional expression, and identity work.

Conclusions

Our study has explored children's literature as a formative environment situated at the intersection of communication, emotional development, and identity formation. Rather than approaching stories as vehicles for transmitting moral messages or linguistic content, the article has argued that literary narratives create symbolic spaces in which children actively construct meanings, negotiate relationships, and develop

increasingly complex understandings of themselves and others. The theoretical perspectives examined throughout the paper suggest that the educational value of children's literature emerges from its capacity to integrate cognitive, emotional, social, and linguistic dimensions of development. Narrative engagement allows children to encounter alternative perspectives, externalize emotions, participate in dialogue, and rehearse forms of social experience within the protected framework of fictional worlds. Stories therefore function not merely as texts to be understood but as environments to be inhabited.

Particular attention has been devoted to bilingual communication contexts and, more specifically, to Romanian minority education in Hungary. Within such settings, literary narratives acquire additional significance. They contribute not only to language development but also to the formation of affective bonds with the heritage language. Romanian becomes more than an educational subject; it becomes a language through which emotions, memories, relationships, and personal meanings may be expressed and shared.

The analysis of "A Carriage of One's Own" further demonstrated that the same narrative may generate different forms of meaning-making across developmental stages. Preschool children engage primarily through emotional and embodied participation, primary school pupils through interpersonal reflection, and adolescents through symbolic and identity-oriented interpretation. The story remains constant, yet its formative functions evolve together with the reader. The findings support a broader educational argument. Identity is rarely formed through direct instruction. It emerges gradually through participation in meaningful cultural experiences. Children's literature represents one such experience. Within the symbolic space of narrative, communication, belonging, and self-understanding become interconnected. In this sense, stories do not merely reflect identity; they contribute to its ongoing construction. The world of stories may be understood as a crucible in which language, emotion, and cultural belonging are transformed into lived experience. It is within this process that children learn not only how to read stories, but also how to read themselves.

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