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**CHILDREN ALBUMS AND STRIPS – A GOOD STARTING FOR
DEVELOPING EARLY CULTURAL COMPETENCE**

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Abstract

The present article shows how children's literature can help children acquire not only language skills but more importantly, they can acquire a rich and varied culture. This is the grounds on which the examples of educational activities with albums and comic strips will be based in the second part of our paper. During my observations in classes of Language and Literature in primary education, I was able to attend sequences of approaching children's literature texts where the purpose was only to acquire knowledge in the mother tongue. The students had different tasks - production of writings, vocabulary exercises - but all of which referred only to improve language skills. However, literature is not only a tool for the mastering the native language. Indeed, I have seen that through children's literature, the child develops other skills and knowledge related to other pillars of the common body of the school curriculum. Networking, meetings with an author or „reading for pleasure” go beyond the simple literary work and allow an opening to other dimensions. I think the representations that children make from their readings, explain the fact that they appropriate more easily the literary works. In the present paper, we will look into some educational activities with albums and strips books that can help children start building a literary culture form a very early age.

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1. Introduction

To give children access to the world of books, and more particularly to those who are far away from literature, is one of the duties of the school. “The works of children’s literature are an excellent means of moral-aesthetic education, but also by linking the past with the present and the future, a way of intercultural dialogue, education in the spirit of culture” (Bodiștean, 2007, p. 10).

The school is not the only one taking the responsibility of children’s readings. Young people say they read more at home. It is therefore obvious that parents also have an essential role in the cultural development of their children. Other partners, such as librarians, booksellers must also accompany the child into the choice of his readings.

Children literature is now present in every elementary school or kindergarten. It plays a very important role in the development of the child because it allows him/her to dream, to question, to exchange ... In the first years of study, it is important that the child starts building a first literary culture. For that, a sort of a reading *route* should be designed in order to gradually build this culture, starting with strong literary works – the real classics of the nursery school. Later on, stress should be laid on the network reading which can be made possible by frequenting a wide variety works. Finally, the reading route takes a quick walk on various works of youth literature. The essential thing is to allow the literary work to enter every child’s memory by various aspects that constitute it: the characters, the narrative, the text of a passage, etc.

2. Problem Statement

Thus, it is important that all children have the opportunity, during their education, to come across rich literary works, and also that they should have frequent contact with such texts and learn to go back those texts. This matter made me wonder about the relationship that children have today with the books.

3. Research Questions

Are there any differences in reading according to the social medium where children come from? To what extent does children literature - and especially children albums - enable the student to access the culture? How can the album become a cultural object? What are the reading habits of children? How can the school help students build a rich and varied culture? What is the role of school partners such as parents, librarians, publishers? These questions lead, in fact, to a research that combines literary work and sociological work. How does children literature play a vital role in having access to culture? How to make the child aware of this culture?

4. Purpose of the Study

To answer this problem, I asked myself about the characteristics of children literature, which allow a child of any social background, to access culture. How can we help students build a first literary culture? How is the album considered a specific learning tool, essential to the development of the child?

From this questioning, I can formulate the hypotheses that students have a poor knowledge of books that may be within their reach. Since all children do not have the same *cultural capital* at home, the discovery of children’s literature in the classroom is essential. School is a place that must reduce inequalities between students. It therefore has a decisive role in the construction of this literary culture but it is not the

only actor. "Literature for children, as well as literature in general, is a form of knowledge of reality through artistic imagery; it uses the artistic image both as a means of knowing the reality and as a means of influencing the reader's knowledge and behaviour" (Stancu, 2010, p. 6). I think that partners of the school such as parents, cultural spaces such as libraries, media libraries or book fairs can play a role equally important in building this culture. Albums and strips books have characteristics of their own. They are useful tools to open on the world and to give culture to a child. Many educational activities around albums and strips books can be offered to children, from an early age.

5. Research Methods

The album is among the first objects of cultural value the child learns to handle with pleasure. This modern creation urges the little child to explore diverse themes and imaginary worlds. At first, the album was conceived as a collection of images and then developed by adding a story told in pictures and texts. Today, the album is a book in which images and text blend harmoniously and thus form the narrative.

There are three main types of articulations between the text and pictures of the album. First, there are albums characterized by redundancy between text and images. The story is described by the text and the pictures illustrate the narrative. Thus, text and images can be understood independently. Then there are albums in which text and images are complementary and interdependent, they cannot be understood separately. It is the text that gives meaning to the images. Last but not least, there are albums that show a narrative gap between the text and the images that accompany it. The story described in the text is different from the one illustrated in the pictures.

Albums are characterized by the double narrative. Words are present in images, even if they cannot be seen, and are actively participating in deciphering the text. In an album, the text generates mental images that, in turn, generate words. This means that the pictures and the text tell the same story and there are two narrators: a textual narrator and an illustrator narrator. The two narrators talk together to tell the same story. The double narration is used when the images intersect the text. On the one hand, the narrator is external to the story he tells in the third person and does not intervene personally. These features are also found in images, the illustrator narrator reveals his omniscience in broad plans or even giving more details on the story than the text. On the other hand, the narrator can be inside the story. He/she is part of the story as a character, most of the time being the main character that frequently addresses the reader.

The authors of these kind of literary creations often play with the ways in which they articulate text and images. Some of them choose to focus the story on the text, or, on the contrary, others will privilege images. The moments of the narrative in which the narrator fails to provide certain information to the reader are present in all types of albums. Indeed, some authors consider that some passages in their stories are less important than the conductor of the narrative, and choose not to detail them, but to leave the reader in charge of interpreting these passages in a personal manner. There are often implicit passages in stories, when things are only suggested in the book, not clearly explained. It is the reader who will interpret them in a personal manner.

The text of the album also makes use of intertextuality and the images make use of inter-imagery. Intertextuality refers to how a text speaks of other commonly known texts, and inter-imagery works the

same, but in the case of images. The characters in the album speak, for example, about characters from well-known stories, such as *Little Red Riding Hood* or *The Three Piglets*.

The three major categories of text and image articulation shown above are applicable to most albums but there are exceptions that work differently. For example, *textless* albums or aesthetics privileged albums, or pop-ups.

At first glance, the albums seem accessible, but if we consider the double narrative process and the correspondences between text and images, these modern creations become more complex. Illustrated fictional stories sometimes create difficulty in understanding among early age readers. Not all children have formed a school culture of the albums - the cultural dimension. The linguistic dimension of the read or listened text is not always at hand and may create barriers to understanding. Recognition or decoding images may seem difficult and the world described in the story may have no resonance for them, no anchor in their field or practical experience in their area of understanding. The feelings of the characters are not always clear, and the continuity of narrative and the permanence of the characters are not always obvious to readers of an early age.

Children's strips, on the other hand, are a means of expression, a play between an interesting story and a well-drawn drawing. There are stories in successive images of different sizes, using cinematic techniques. They are characterized by the use of the *balloons* in which the text is inserted. Drawings therefore use a specific code and represent an independent literary form recognized as the 9th art. These modern creations are attractive, stimulate children's interest and captivate them. The concept is simple: an image summarizing a story or a scene and, above it, a few lines of text that briefly describe the action in the image. Due to the fact that comic stories are said in pictures, they are very expressive and, consequently, easy to read. Their reading is recreational, not at all difficult or monotonous. Comic strips can be read on roles and offer the possibility of expressive reading due to the presentation of situations in suggestive images.

6. Findings

The ways in which the albums can be exploited in the classroom are numerous. Teachers can use the albums on a regular basis, as a ritual: they read the albums in front of the class, giving children a moment of collective listening to a story without pedagogical pursuits, but just to make children live together to enjoy the story, strictly respecting the specific text and syntax of the book. A reading, in the morning, at the beginning of the school program can serve as a switch from the children's family program to the school program. The class can be endowed with different albums in a corner of the reading that children can access at any time.

Each album has its own specificity that favours the implementation of specific activities, facilitating the achievement of various objectives and competencies. Teachers can initiate conversations based on album images to stimulate language development. Networking of albums can be a good way to build a literary culture among children. "On the same model as intertextuality, we sometimes speak of interconnectivity when the images are connected, which is common in albums" (Poslaniec & Houyel, 2005, p. 222). The objective of these networking is to intercept several texts and to set a problem. For example, networking of works by a single author allows the knowledge and interpretation of each of his creations to

be deepened. The listening stories are embedded in children's memory and become reference points. Children get familiar with the author's language and understand their intention more easily. These networking activities can be done in the form of a project culminating in the arrival of the author in the midst of the children.

Here are a few steps that can be followed in the didactic approach:

- discovery of the album (the children observe the cover, the title, the author, the illustrator, the collection, etc.) and the hypothesis about the story from the cover;
- author information that can be searched, along with children, on the author's website;
- reading the chosen album and verifying text comprehension by asking children about text and images, finding morals where appropriate;
- children work in groups to find questions they might like to ask the writer;
- making the network of works of the same author, or making a poster with the titles of other albums of the same writer.

Another way to approach classrooms with older children could include the following stages over several hours:

- teacher reading and the first collective reformulation of the album to make the plan of main ideas;
- the passage from oral to writing - the children write after dictation rewriting the text starting from the plan of main ideas;
- children make a plan of main ideas on the board, respecting the chronology of the text;
- then children are invited to imagine writing a new episode of the story, respecting the logic of the text and using the dialogue.
- the teacher can also practice vocabulary elements, starting from the text: names or grammar elements.

Textless, image-only, albums are great sources for producing oral messages. Children may be asked to add words to the images in the album by exploring one page per day at the beginning of the program.

The use of strips for didactic purposes offers some advantages, of which the inter-disciplinary dimension remains the most important. Due to its shape, the exploitation of comics is mainly directed towards two disciplines: Language and literature and Visual arts and practical skills.

Used as sources of literary exploitation, the comic strips allow for networking based on: characters, genres (science fiction, adventure), authors and their works, stripes, gangs on a floor, short stories, albums extended on many pages). Drawings allow the development of autonomous reading and are sources of recreational reading for children. When children are not yet familiar with reading longer texts and have difficulty reading, comics can be an easier way to practice autonomous reading.

Like theatrical plays, comic strips can be a privileged tool for studying the dialogue they use almost exclusively. Through the technique used, that of the frame and character direction resembles the theatre in images and can become sources of practice of the diction by dramatization. They can also be starting points for writing projects: students can be asked to write a continuation of an unfinished story in writing (for example, starting from the exclamation of the character in the last box on a page that mirrors the view a thing on the next page, which the reader has not yet explored); Writing dialogs - Ask students to assign

characters to characters by taking account of information in images (attitudes, sceneries, characters, etc.); or, more difficultly, students may be asked to write a script after studying a model in class. Of course, comic strips can also be used for literary interpretation, as is the case with stories. For visual arts classes, children can create their own comic strips, following the specific stages: scenario, cut, pencil drawing, colouring.

7. Conclusion

Discovery of children's literature in the classroom is essential to the cultural development of the child. During my observations in the different schools, I saw the teachers use children's literature either as a separate subject or as a springboard to other disciplines. For example, in one of the schools, the teacher relies on children's literature to teach Romanian, discover the world. I also could see that the reading for pleasure, time of sharing between the teacher and his/her students, was frequently used during the school year.

However, despite the classroom meeting times with the books, I noticed that many children did not make real differences between genres, hence difficulties in recognizing them. For them, an album, a novel, a comic strip, are above all stories. We understand here that students do not yet hold all the codes to decipher the characteristics of every literary genre. But, all agree that while reading a book, the child feels the pleasure of the text, based on the sense of security, because "through the act of reading children joyfully live experiences which, if they were real, would not be as pleasant" (Gorodețchi, 2008, p.56).

In addition, only few students come to school with other literary references (from home or from the library) except those acquired within the school. Taking all that into account, from what we have just seen above, we can think that home-made reading has less impact on the child's culture than the readings they do in class. Indeed, it seems that children tend to forget more easily the literary works they read at home. So we can deduce that the readings made at home will have fewer influences on culture than classroom readings. A literary work networking or the visit of an author will have stronger repercussions in the literary culture of the child. "Reading, the first moment of meeting with the text, calls for the knowledge of two types of codes: generic and cultural, but above all, the knowledge of some mechanisms that the transformation of words into images, events or situations implies" (Stancu, 2010, p. 38). Thus, by having a classroom approach to books, students will have a cultural openness and will gradually launch into reading different genres of literary works. "Books continue to shape sensitivity, dreams, consciousness, and the health of children, proposing models for life" (Rațiu, 2003, p. 14).

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