

**Children's Literature In School
Libraries:
Cross-Cultural Approches**

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To recognise differences between equals, to accept and retain diversity implies the intervention of school, in particular in its practices. In this context, children's literature – in particular one Portuguese book analysed here in relation to a school library experience – gives the possibility to work on the topic of diversity. That book is an interesting literary work that may develop intercultural education and conviviality in a society with a plurality of cultures. In this presentation the intercultural messages presented by the book and analysed through young children's reaction to the story.

Introduction

In the last two decades, Portugal has seen an important improvement in children's literature edition. The changes have occurred not only in the number of children's books edited, but there has also been an important transformation in their contents. In fact, Portuguese children's literature began to propose new topics that could not be referred before the Revolution in 1974, with the abolition of censorship. For example, the war in Portuguese colonies in Africa, the deep social problems in our country – like emigration and poverty – were forbidden subjects for Portuguese authors.

Today we live in a different society. This introduction has one purpose: to show and to reflect briefly on a deep truth. Social and political conditions have completely changed – nowadays we are free to say and write what we want – but, as we know, beliefs, patterns of thinking and behaviours do not change as quickly as a revolution in political government does. So we have a lot of work to do, and the children are in the centre of this changing process. In this context, children's literature has an important role. In fact, several studies confirm that children's literature is an important channel for transmitting societal values and beliefs and that the contact with quality literature may contribute to develop a certain vision of the world.

The school system also has its own responsibilities, and I would like to emphasise the responsibility to promote the socialisation of children, valorising the different cultures that coexist today in Portuguese schools. In fact, today our society is facing an important migration process, receiving people from several countries, in particular from Eastern Europe, Africa and Brazil. The school has to create an environment where the values promoted are respect for each other, acceptance of diversity, tolerance and solidarity. To recognise the differences between equals, to accept and protect diversity implies the intervention of school, in particular in its practices. Books can also contribute to the construction of mutual understanding. When children read, listen and talk about multicultural stories they will be able to understand the diversity of the world they live in. With such books

children can establish connections between the experience of the world and what they read/listen to in children's literature. And even if the "spectator-role" is different from the direct experience of the world (Applebee, 1978, pp.128-129), the reconstruction of a text can always be an important process of reflecting upon the "events" in the world.

Cultural diversity in children's literature

In this presentation I will focus on one particular aspect: the role of books that present a multicultural vision of society and the richness we can afford by connecting with the diversity of people and cultures. Considering the seduction and power of fiction/stories (Chambers, 1983), in particular if we take the characteristics of the child (Vygostky, 1978; Applebee, 1978), we may confirm the importance of contact with books that present cultural diversity and the vision of others. And even if white/male heroes still predominate in Portuguese children's literature, the fact is that new – and more realistic – "visions of the world" are being presented to our children by Portuguese writers.

In fact, books always present a specific view of the world, they have their own "ideology". John Stephens, for example, has demonstrated a number of different ways in which ideology is realised in children's literature. Further, "in the development of the child as a social being, language has the central role" (Halliday, 1978, p.9). In the same way, social categories are constructed through language (van Dijk, 1999), and so it is important to consider the role of language in children's books. It is not my intention, in this presentation, to develop these important aspects of children's literature, but we cannot forget that by developing a particular style, a writer prompts certain ways of seeing things, while suppressing and downplaying others. As Stephens says, "writing for children is usually purposeful, its intention being to foster in the child reader a positive apperception of some socio-cultural values" (1992, p.3). In the book considered here, those values are related to a multicultural vision of society, a society where diversity and solidarity are shown in a positive way.

My explanation is divided into two sections. First I analyse one Portuguese book that explores the topic of diversity, pointing to its main characteristics. But, I consider that we have to pay special attention to how real children react to stories and what they really understand and absorb from them. So, I'll describe and comment on an experience with that book in a school library with a group of pre-school children (five years old).

Analysing a book: *The mysterious eggs*

The mysterious eggs (*Os ovos misteriosos*) is a picture book, and the author of the text, Luísa Ducla Soares, is an important writer in Portugal. Her books reveal a renovated form to address to children, either within realism or fantasy form. The book is illustrated by Manuela Bacelar who is also one of our major artists in the field of picture books. In this case, the text is independent from the pictures and these put the reader in the position of an observer, looking at the actions carried out by the characters in the story.

The mysterious eggs is an animal story and we know that children like animals and that sometimes through animal stories it becomes easier to talk about reality. The identification between the child and the story characters makes possible to look at the problems by the eyes of the other. By taking the place of the other – here, an animal – the

child can understand, in a better way, other points of view and validate the difference. The child learns to face the world through different perspectives and becomes more sensitive to its own culture and to understand and accept the culture of the other.

This story presents the multicultural message in a positive way, showing behaviours of acceptance of others. Those positive behaviours begin with the main character, a chicken, which accepts the role of caring for different kinds of eggs, which will hatch into different kinds of animals. A parrot, a serpent, a crocodile, an ostrich and finally a small chicken come from the eggs and to each animal, the chicken says "Oh, it's my son." With these words she is accepting the diversity of her new family, born on the nest she has made, although the animals belong to different species. The situation is narrated in a gradual way. At first her reaction is not evaluated, but when the third egg hatches, she is "suspicious", with the fourth egg she is "curious" and with the fifth, she "opens her wings with happiness", because it is a chicken baby. But finally she underlines the richness of the group – "Look at my family! (...) What a variety! It's so funny!" And she doesn't listen to the voices of prejudice. When a partridge advises her, "take care of your little chicken. Don't mind the other tiny animals", the narrator tells us what is going on in chicken's mind: "how could she abandon them after she had treated them with such love?" And she goes on with the new family, accepting the different characteristics of each son.

The next episode shows the relationship between the chicken and her sons. Here we have the point of view of the chicken. She is worried because each animal does something that she can not do and she is afraid of what could happen to her babies. And she tries to do something pleasant to each animal: she scratches the snake; she talks to the parrot, she takes special food to the ostrich, she looks for seeds for the small chicken and she washes the crocodile's teeth. The sentences that bind these two segments of the story are: "But she loved them all. She took care of all." The adversative establishes the opposition between what social conventions should advise – it is impossible to build up a family with such different subjects – and the commitment and feelings of the chicken. In the Portuguese text, the second "all" appears at the beginning of the sentence, a position that emphasises, once again, the chicken's positive behaviour towards her sons.

The same tolerance and solidarity is revealed by her sons. When the baby chicken is attacked by a boy, all the brothers try to help him and it is by their congregated actions that they succeeded in saving him. Each animal uses its specific characteristics to help the youngest brother: the serpent shows its poisonous teeth; the crocodile, its big mouth; the parrot talks like a person (the bad boy thinks the parrot is a policeman), and the ostrich runs very fast. The appearance of the boy introduces a conflict and a lack of balance in the story (the intervention of humans – first the woman who took away the chicken's own eggs and now the boy – could be another aspect to analyse) but its function is to strengthen the relationship among all the brothers.

So, when we look closely at the language of the book, we realise that the behaviour of the chicken and her feelings are always presented in a positive way. Most of the events have the chicken as the subject and the list of lexical items associated with the events reflects a positive evaluation of the main character: "how lucky I am"; "variety" and "funny" (she calls to her family); "she felt love"; "she was happy"; "she liked them all"; "she took care of all" (twice). Meanwhile, the surprise of the chicken when she sees all those animals hatching from the eggs is both natural and expected. The main point is that she decides that all the animals are her sons and that she will take care of them.

In this book we have also a “mother”, presented according to the conventional social roles: it is supposed that a mother takes care of her sons. But in this case we have a special group of sons – each one is from different species. In this point, the chicken’s attitude presents a new paradigm. She decides to take care of all animals and not only her real son, as the other “mother”, the partridge, suggested. It is this new element that is important to analyse, as we will see in the section where the reactions of the children/listeners are reported.

Narrative Structure

What motivates the action narrated in this book is the chicken’s sense of loss – she has no sons because humans always took her eggs. So, she decides to run, to find a place where she could keep her eggs. After the escape, we can identify four major sequences:

1. construction of a new nest where five different eggs will appear
2. birth of the five different animals and acceptance by the chicken
3. relationship between the mother chicken and her five different babies
4. baby chicken in danger and helped by his “brothers.”

The story ends in harmony. The chicken makes a special cake – with five parts, each one with a particular ingredient according to the preferences of each son – and everybody is happy. The chicken is happy, because she finally has her own family; the five animals are happy because they feel good altogether. They are different, but they love each other and they love their mother. The final song they all sing is representative of the symbolic function of the story, and foster the idea of social integration of larger kinds. The idea of conviviality in a society with a plurality of cultures – presented in the different characteristics of the five animals – is clearly presented in this ending: “We are all brothers,/ we are all different:/ some of us have a beak,/ others have teeth,/ others have scales, / and another have wings/ [...] We are all different,/ but we all love / the very good chicken / that is our mother”.

Children’s response to *The mysterious eggs*

The story I have described was read to a group of children aged five (fifteen children), in a school library during “story time”. After the reading we talked about the story and I have recorded the children’s verbal reactions and comments. Two days latter I was again with the same group and I asked who wanted to tell the story I had read. A boy and a girl told the story and afterwards the entire group talked about it. With this second session I wanted to know what they remembered from the story and what kind of details they did pick up.

The experience I will relate is based on reader-response theories not explored in depth here. I agree with many others that reading a text not only about deciphering the words or knowing the “who” and the “where” of a story, but it also means to put together – in particular with young children – the meanings we construct during reading or listening to a story with the experience children bring to the texts (cf. Applebee, 1978; Protherough, 1983; Serafini, 2003). Reading and/or listening to reading is a “social” practice, with important implications for the child in several fields of his development and teachers – in classrooms or in school libraries – have to pay special attention to the ways they work with children’s literature.

In the case *The mysterious eggs*, the main topic is the idea of conviviality in a society with a plurality of cultures, and one objective of multicultural education is to learn how children react to the events presented in the story and how they evaluate the behaviours it suggests. Therefore I am not presenting all the elements that occurred in the two sessions with the group of children. I will concentrate on those aspects related to multicultural education. However, this is a bit difficult because most of the time aspects of the children's reactions are inter-related. The responses of the group of children, in their first session, are organised in the following categories: evaluation of characters/situations; relationship with personal experience; generalisation of the events. The results of the second session (two days later) will be commented in a single block.

Evaluation of characters and situations

After listening to the story in the first session, the collective reaction was positive. Everybody liked the story and when asked about animals they preferred, gender differences were apparent: the girls preferred the mother chicken, the chicken baby and the parrot; the boys preferred the parrot, the serpent and the crocodile. The ostrich was chosen by one girl (in the second session no one chose that animal).

A problem appears if they have to explain the reason for their preferences. Here, the answers were vague and generally related to a physical aspect of the animal that the story already emphasises: the serpent, because of the "poisonous teeth", the crocodile because of its "big mouth", the parrot because it "talks", the chicken because it "walks on the ground".

When talking about stories, children pay special attention to characters and to their behaviours. In this case, the children began to talk spontaneously about the chicken and the different eggs, with the children wanting to see the pictures and focusing on the different shapes and colours of the eggs that hatched into animals of different species. That interest was the starting point for a dialogue about the behaviour of the chicken and her sons.

For example, some children were sensitive to the problems that the chicken had to face at the beginning of the story, with such different sons, but approved her decision of taking care of all animals. Two girls said that if they were the chicken, they would only take care of the "real" chicken son. After some collective discussion about the possible reasons that oriented the chicken decision, the two girls reformulated their opinion. But one still says that "they all were born from eggs," indicating that she had to find some "similarity" between the different animals. There is some relation between the animal the child prefers and the way she sees the chicken behaviour. In fact, the two girls who choose the small chicken as the animal they preferred are the same who said they would only take care of the chicken's "real" son.

The main discussion around the story focused on the relationship between the chicken and her sons and about event sequence number four, when the baby chicken is in danger and the brothers helped him. For the most part, evaluative reactions were focused on that feature of the story. Several children tried to justify why the animals helped the small chicken: "because they are brothers/friends", "they had to save each other", "because the chicken son was too small/weak" or "we have to help our friends" (process of generalisation).

The intervention of the boy in the story had a negative evaluation: everybody said he was a "bad boy", and some of the children said that they would beat him to help the small

chicken, which “should be left in freedom”. Of course, sometimes the immediate experience of the child comes up, and one remembered that we also “eat chicken,” but others pointed out that “in the story it’s different”. In the story the accepted behaviour is to help each other, the solidarity being an important topic here.

Relationship with personal experience

Some children associated aspects from the story with their own experience. For example, when talking about the different shapes of the eggs, one said that his father has bought an ostrich egg. The topic of solidarity presented by the book also arouses some parallels with the children’s own experience. The fourth episode, the central one for the children, prompted most recollection of personal experience. In fact, one of the boys related an event that occurred during the playtime, establishing a connection between story and reality. Similarly, a girl focused on relationships, saying that she has a sister and she likes her.

All of the children emphasised the importance of solidarity – “helping others” – and that we can be friends even if we are different. Using Protherough’s (1983) words, we have projection into a character and into a situation, and associating between book and reader.

Generalisation

In the previous paragraphs I have not included the children’s responses concerning the question of generalisation. When evaluating and relating the story to their experience, sometimes children generalise, for example, when they justified the behaviour of the animals helping each other by saying that “we should help friends when they are in danger,” children are evaluating and generalising at the same time. Generalisation is quite rare with small children. In this case, the generalisation was the result of dialogue among the group and was the final step that some children were able to take.

Children re-telling the story (second session)

The re-telling of the story had interesting results. At the beginning I asked if the five-year-olds remembered the story I had told and who wanted to tell the story again. A girl and a boy offered to do it and, as we can see, there were great differences between the retold versions.

The girl began with the last sequence I have identified: baby chicken is in danger and is helped by his brothers. This episode was certainly the most important to her and she emphasised the fact that the baby chicken could not protect himself and the brothers helped him against the “bad boy”, describing with some detail what each animal has done to help the brother, in particular the exact rhymes the parrot repeated: “You are a thief, you are a thief/ I’m going to capture you” (“És ladrão, és ladrão,/ vou prender-te na prisão!”). She reduced the story to this sequence only and, curiously, later in the conjoint discussion, when asked about which animal in the story she would like to be, she chose the baby chicken. Although this aspect is related to the pre-operational stage that Piaget describes, with the tendency to focus attention on a single detail of an experience, the focus on that particular episode of the story also demonstrates the importance of those events involving a situation of danger to the baby chicken and the positive intervention of its brothers.

The boy started the story with the sequence of the five eggs in the nest. He omitted the cause of the chicken's initial escape, but he put special attention on the fact that there were five different eggs with five different animals and carefully named them. Then he talked about the chicken which took care of the animals, giving no details about what the chicken has done for them (sequence number three). Afterwards he also emphasised the episode in which the baby chicken was helped by his brothers. The happy resolution of this episode was understood as the end of the story for both children.

It is the most problematic episode of the story that captured the attention of not only this boy and girl, but also of the entire group. In fact, the collective talking that took place in the two sessions was focused in particular on that episode. The main ideas that almost all the children underlined, focusing the same aspect several times during the discussion, were the fact that "the chicken took care of all her sons", "the animals helped the small chicken" and finally that "they were happy altogether".

Final remarks

I would like to summarise some main aspects of my explanation and to point out some complementary remarks. One of those remarks is that in general we know just a little about the individual children and their responses to literature, among other things, those responses depend on their "individuality". With small children, the effect of the group is also an element to consider. Individual responses change many times when a child is integrated in a group. Often they prefer to agree with the choices of others. For example, when asked about the animal they preferred, the first child to answer said the parrot, meanwhile another said he liked the baby chicken and the first immediately revised his choice, saying that he preferred the parrot *and* the baby chicken.

One main idea that such experience demonstrates is that the interaction between the children's life and the world presented by the story is also an important aspect in reader-response. Life experience gives a pattern of expectations that some children brought to the conversation. For example, when asked what they would do if they were the chicken, the first reaction of two girls was that they would care only for the real son. The pragmatic voices of reality also entered these discussions: remember the boy that said that "we also eat chicken". One important reflection concerning Portuguese educational context in particular is that teachers pay little attention to the "echoes" literature awakes in each child. The practices are still too centred on decoding exercises and standardised comprehension strategies, neglecting the experiences of the child and the meanings he/she can construct by him/herself, during reading.

Finally, I think that we must talk with children about what occurs in our society and that school has also the responsibility of student's character development. The Portuguese curriculum points out the importance of education for values and we can use the dynamic relationship between reader and text to discuss and promote values that are crucial in today's society. In this context, reading and talking about just one story like *The mysterious eggs* is not enough. Only on a regular basis, working with multicultural material and with children's literature that presents such views, can we contribute to harmony and mutual understanding in society, ensuring that differences become an element of union and share, contributing to mutual enrichment.

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