

FROM THE PAGE TO THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

Handbook to approach inequalities
through children's literature
from an intersectional perspective



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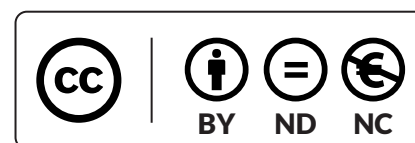
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PROLOGUE

“Uncomfortable Readings for Free Minds”

Oh, teachers! What a peculiar species! I remember them as if it were yesterday: with that determination to make us sit in rows, to write straight, neat letters, to think “correctly”. But do you know what? Here I am, Pippi Longstocking, the girl who never followed the rules, at the age of 83, talking to 21st-century teachers about children, books and what we call educating. I promise you sincerity and perhaps a bit of chaos, but that is how things are when you look at them from the top of a tree or when doing a handstand.

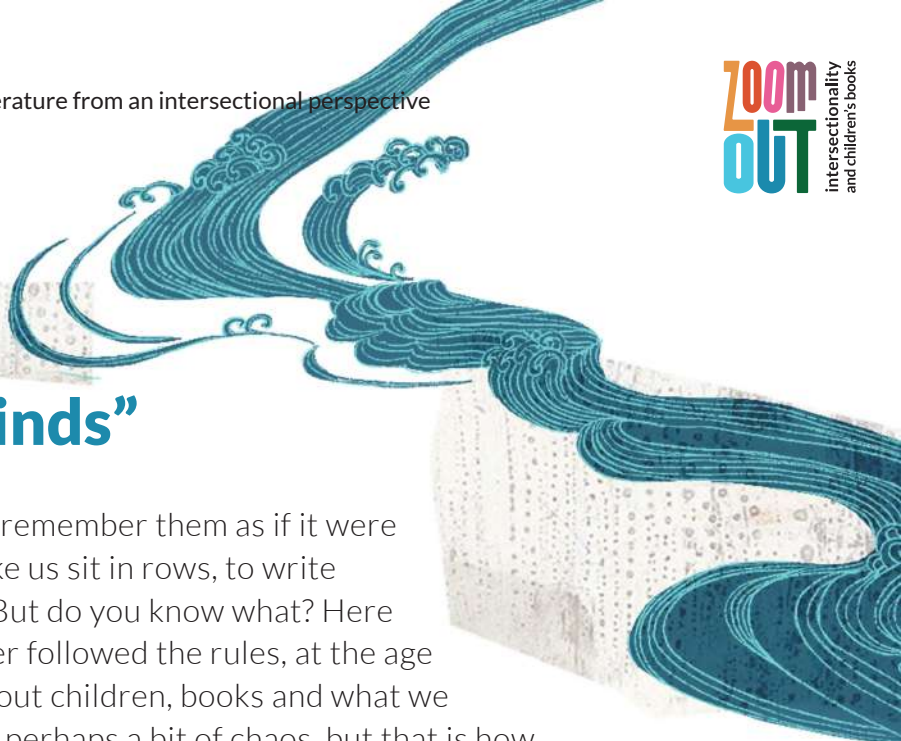
They say there are books that cause discomfort because they talk about uncomfortable things: racism, sexism, poverty, power, difference. And the solution that some adults have found is... to hide them! To change words. To “disinfect” stories. To “protect” the children, they say. Oh, children! Always treated as if they were glass jars, fragile, brittle. But I have to say something loud and clear: boys and girls are not fragile or simple-minded. Actually, they have a perfect radar to detect the injustices of the world, an innate sense of freedom and an infinite ability to imagine alternatives. They are braver than many adults and, above all, much less rigid.

And do you know what I mean by rigid? I’m talking about those adults who see everything in black and white, as if life could be summarised in good intentions or simple solutions. Children, on the other hand, pick up the nuances. They know that a story can make you laugh and think at the same time, that the same character can be both good and bad, that the world cannot be divided into boxes. They understand it, because they have still not been trained to see reality in one way only.

But there is also another debate, isn’t there? The one about old books, such as the traditional tales gathered by the Grimm Brothers, Tintin comics or Roald Dahl’s stories, or even some of my own stories, accused of perpetuating stereotypes. And what can we do with them? Should we shield children’s eyes? Should we rewrite them as if the past never existed? Or should we do something better; give them the tools to read them with their eyes wide open? So that they enjoy the stories, yes, but without losing that critical perspective. I’m not afraid of kids finding out that the world, sometimes, has been and still is unfair. If they don’t know that, how will they change it?

Why then, do we want to remove anything that is challenging, that makes us feel uncomfortable? Stories don’t exist so that everything is nice and easy. They exist for us to ask ourselves questions. Inequalities, struggles, fears... all of that is present in the world and also in books. And that’s a good thing. It’s necessary. Because it makes us think, it makes us feel, it makes us grow.

Look at me. I am not exactly a “conventional” model. My mother is an angel, my father an exotic king who sails the seas, I barely went to school and I live on my own with a horse and Mr. Nilsson, a monkey. But do you know what? I have experienced adventures, I’ve met all types of people, I’ve learned that the world is bigger than any rule. And that is what we should teach children: that they can do what they like, think how they like, and not be afraid of differences.



Teachers, allow books to be earthquakes. Allow them to stir up emotions, to question things, to trigger conversations and debates. And above all, trust boys and girls. Talk to them like you would any other person with a head and heart. Don't let "difficult" topics hold you back; they are the most important ones. Children can understand them much better than some adults who get nervous only imagining what others might think.

So, why not offer them provocative stories? Books that are like an afternoon in my garden: full of crazy ideas, laughter and challenges. And remember that emotional education and critical thinking are not taught with answers, but with questions. Questions that break rules and open windows.

With love, chaos and a good dose of freedom,

Pippi Longstocking¹



1. This text was written in conversation with ChatGPT.

1

INTRODUCTION

“Seven Dangers and a Conversation”

Gerard Coll-Planas (Universitat de Vic-Universitat Central de Catalunya)

To begin, I would like to sincerely thank Pippi Longstocking who, after years retired from the public arena, agreed to write the prologue of this Handbook. Not in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine such a huge honour.

Pippi, in her text, brilliantly and eloquently lays out many of the topics we address in this text and, at the same time, provides stimulating examples of how to address them. Below, I will try to further explore some aspects considered in the prologue and I will introduce some nuances (accepting that my contribution will be infinitely more boring than that of our illustrious prologue writer, as I am writing sitting at my desk with my computer, as opposed to reflecting while hanging upside-down from a tree).

The prologue shows us that we are facing a complex task when addressing the subject of inequalities in children's literature. From the far-right platform, books that are considered to address subjects such as gender, racism or sexuality in an excessively open or critical manner are being censored; this situation is reflected in the book *Ban this book* (Gratz 2023), in which the protagonist finds a way to recover the books that are banned in her school library.

In parallel, from a critical view of inequalities, there is a trend to review, rewrite and propose the withdrawal of books that are considered to be reproducing stereotypes and inequalities. Here we have the example of the rewriting of the works of Roald Dahl, the debates about what to do with *The Adventures of Tintin*, and a questioning of traditional stories (often without taking care to distinguish which versions we are referring to and making very literal interpretations).

When we explain that we are working on a project on inequalities and children's literature, we often find that people from the literary field

receive us with a certain air of suspicion because they presume that we will suggest rewriting classic works or writing up a type of list of books that are “sufficiently” feminist, anti-racist or anti-ableist. But that is not our intention: **we want to strike up a conversation, a conversation that is sensitive to both inequalities and to the invaluable contributions of art in general, and of literature and illustration in particular.**

A conversation that makes sense as long as it includes many voices: of children and adults, teachers, parents, social entities, authors, illustrators, librarians, publishers, scholars... And if we want to broaden the scope of the conversation: why not also include Artificial Intelligence? AI is present in this project in four distinct ways: first, it appears directly in the prologue and epilogue of this Guide; second, it plays a role in



the Toolbox—through the resource ‘Walking on the Other Side of the Tale: Playing with ChatGPT and Stereotypes’ and by inspiring ideas for ‘*The Adventures of Tintin in an Unequal World*’; third, in some chapters, it accompanied us in the solitude of writing; and fourth, it assisted with translations in this multilingual project, which works across six languages—although many chapters were translated by professional human translators and all content was reviewed by human eyes.

This leads us to ask: What is a desirable role for AI to play in the educational conversation? It is a question that is impossible to answer right now because we are in the first stages of a change of paradigm that we feel is constantly surpassing us. We see opportunities and risks; and sometimes one becomes the other or they merge in unsettling ways. In any case, these tools are here and we have decided to include them, even if peripherally, in the development of this conversation.

At the same time, it is a conversation that we suggest will highlight the importance of good children's literature and reflect on how it can be brought into primary classrooms to debate about the topic of inequality. We believe this is necessary because most of the existing resources addressing inequality in primary education tend to adopt a monofocal perspective (only focusing on one axis of inequality) and the volume of existing resources about the different axes is very unequal (recently there has been a lot of material about the topic of gender but there are other axes such as disability that are addressed less, and others such as social class that we do not even know how to address). At the same time, many of the materials have a very explicit and literal tone that deteriorates the message. In contrast, **we believe that addressing the inequalities through literature provides us with complexity and nuances that enable us to build a more significant and transformative conversation.**

FROM THE 7 YOUNG GOATS TO THE 7 DANGERS

After having explained many times the story of “The Wolf and the Seven Young Goats” to my daughter, I asked myself why the wolf had to be black and had to cover himself in flour to whiten his hooves and pretend to be the mother goat. What if I changed the story slightly and it turned out that the wolf was white and he had to cover his hooves with coal to trick the young goats? Is the colour of the goats and the wolf relevant? Is the association of the colour black with evil problematic? Does it promote racism? Am I taking the chromatic choice a step too far? Is it an absurd reflection resulting from having explained the story too many times and from the accumulated fatigue of night-time reading sessions?

I don't have the answer and, actually, this is not about finding the answers, it is about looking for questions that each person responds to according to their context, their way of looking at the world, what they think makes sense for their practice. For now, I change the wolf's colours depending on the day.

As regards the story “The Wolf and the Seven Young Goats”, in this section I would like to point out seven dangers in the way inequalities are addressed in children's literature. Why talk about dangers? Firstly, because dangers are a fundamental ingredient in children's literature that are at risk of becoming extinct as the result of an adult perspective that wants to protect children as if they were glass jars, in the words of Pippi. Secondly, it is a reference to the text by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie *The danger of a single story* (Adichie 2019), which we think is very inspiring, and as a result we begin by explaining this danger.



1. THE DANGER OF A SINGLE STORY

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains that, in her childhood in Nigeria, she was affected by the fact that she only had books by Western authors featuring white children living in situations that were far removed from hers:

I loved those American and British books I read. They stirred my imagination. They opened up new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are (Adichie 2019: 6).

The author, therefore, assessing what literature from the Global North gave her, also considers the importance of the presence of characters with whom she could identify. In this vein, we can address identification as a complex process: we do not only identify with the characters who are like us, but we can also see ourselves reflected in a monster such as Shrek, in the mythological figure of Medusa or in any other human character that is (apparently) very different to us.¹ This complexity of the identification process, however, cannot be used as an excuse to avoid wondering who feels represented and who does not in the books that we read. **If we review the books we have in the classroom, in the library or at home, we will realise that not all children 'fit in them', especially those who, for one reason or another, are outside the standard forms of representation.**

This is not only related to the individual experience of reading, since how social groups are represented has a structural dimension:

Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity (Adichie 2019: 11).

In this vein, Santiago Alba Rico (2015: 17) warns us of the danger of idealising reading and invites us to examine the role it can play in reinforcing inequalities: "It is true that reading teaches, but it also teaches wrong and harmful things. Reading liberates, but it also ties one to prejudices and nonsense".

Sara K. Ahmed (2018: 30) states that increasing the number of voices included is a political necessity: "It is imperative in a democracy that many voices are included in discourse, and conversations around relevant topics are not easy when it comes to negotiating everyone's individual experiences".

At this point, the challenge is to name the individual and structural dimensions and tackle the resistance that arises by questioning hegemonic literary standards.

2. THE DANGER OF ROMANTICISING CHILDHOOD

In the prologue Pippi mentions that children "have a perfect radar to detect the injustices of the world, an innate sense of freedom and an infinite ability to imagine alternatives". As a trained adult and as a trainer perhaps I do not have the legitimacy to question that expressed by the rebellious prologue writer, but I believe that assuming that children have that innate sense of freedom and justice can hinder us from seeing that they are not blank, pure and immaculate canvases, but they also participate (sometimes without being aware of it) in inequalities.

After all, the idea of childhood itself is a historical construction: it has not always existed, it has been defined and continues to be defined in different ways, its contours are variable... And what's more, it is an adult construction. Therefore, **how we define childhood says more about adults than**

1. As chapter 18 compellingly shows us, the issue of identification can effectively be explored in the classroom through theatrical techniques.

about children. And, sociologically it is very interesting to analyse children's literature from this perspective: how is the idea of childhood constructed? What are the values that adults consider relevant to transmit to new generations? What are they deciding needs to be “disinfected”, censured or rewritten?

3. THE DANGER OF TALKING ABOUT INEQUALITIES

How can we accompany children to understand that they live in an unfair world? How do we talk about a world pierced by inequalities that affect them and cause them discomfort; inequalities that contribute towards reproducing (consciously or unconsciously) discomfort in others? There is no univocal or universal response to this question. Each person has to test out attempts at responses as to how to address the topic, observing its context.

At the same time, we believe that addressing the topic of inequalities with children entails the risk of tackling topics that they are not prepared for, which can lead us to bringing about the opposite effect to what we wanted. For example, if we talk about gender stereotypes or racism at ages or in contexts in which there is no awareness of the problem, we might implant the idea that there are things specific to boys and girls, or that there are skin colours that have positive or negative connotations, achieving the opposite effect to what we wanted: pointing to boys and girls with non-standard gender expressions or introducing a hierarchy in the classroom according to skin colour.

4. THE DANGER OF NOT TALKING ABOUT INEQUALITIES

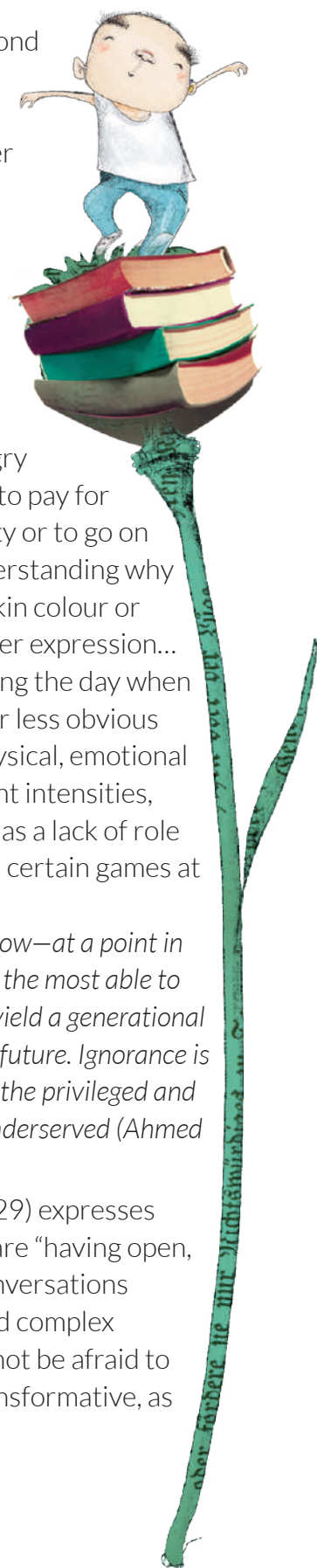
But it is also important to take into consideration that the opposite danger also exists. Not addressing the topic of inequality contributes towards children experiencing aspects related to

inequalities with shame, discomfort and guilt; it means that we cannot help them to understand that these experiences are related to forms of structural oppression; that we cannot help them to put words on the experiences of discomfort or injustice; that we cannot express responses that go beyond intervening with the specific people involved in an incident; that we cannot promote deeper changes.

This might appear to be very abstract, but it does relate to everyday experiences such as being embarrassed to invite friends to your house, feeling like your body is inadequate or that your hair is ugly, being angry that your family cannot afford to pay for you to do an afterschool activity or to go on an outing with school, not understanding why people insult you about your skin colour or for not having a standard gender expression... There are many occasions during the day when inequalities appear in a more or less obvious way: at times in the form of physical, emotional or symbolic violence of different intensities, at others in a subtler way such as a lack of role models or being excluded from certain games at break time. In this context,

Avoiding these conversations now—at a point in our students' lives when they are the most able to consider new perspectives—will yield a generational ignorance we can't afford for the future. Ignorance is not bliss. Ignorance is a luxury of the privileged and a barrier to the unnoticed and underserved (Ahmed 2018: 30).

Thus, Sara K. Ahmed (2018: 29) expresses that it is fundamental that we are “having open, honest, sometimes difficult conversations in our classrooms”; delicate and complex conversations that we should not be afraid to have if we want them to be transformative, as considered in the chapter 13.



5. THE DANGER OF LITERALNESS

In current children's literature vegan dragons, good witches and friendly ogres are taking the place of terrifying dragons, evil witches and disgusting ogres. Murders, abandonments and death are also at risk of disappearing. A good example is *The Three Little Pigs*: in current versions, the first and second little pigs do not die, they take shelter in the house of the third little pig, who welcomes them with open arms. We have to prevent children from experiencing this trauma! Bruno Bettelheim (1976) states that this kind of adaptation distorts the original meaning of the stories (which is the reason why they have survived so many centuries) and they do not take into account that children are capable of making much more profound interpretations of the stories, of capturing the symbolic and metaphorical dimensions better than many adults who become trapped in the literal meaning.

In this same vein, Eva Martínez says:

All the scenes that adult teachers consider to be cruel respond to a fear -also cruel- of the child. That is why we cannot take them away from them, because we leave them without a place to put their fears. We cannot take away the wolf, the witch or other monsters, because we leave them alone with their darkest fears trapped inside. They are entitled to scenes where they can overcome their fears and the characters who embody them (Martínez 2017: 67).

In this way, we can understand, thanks to Bettelheim (1976), that the first and second little pigs represent two early stages in child development, that have to die so that we can grow; or that the stepmother has the function of giving us a place for our hostile feelings towards the maternal figure.

At the same time, questioning the literalness entails a recognition of fantasy. In the words of the anthropologist Michèle Petit (2024: 88): "reality needs fantasy to be desirable". In other words, people need "a poetic, narrative, fictional dimension (...) to dream about the world; to inhabit it" (147). The fantastic dimension

connects us to people who lived before us and enables us to project into the future. And there is also something paradoxical about fantasy: it distances us from the immediate world and its parameters, and at the same time it gives us tools to understand and inhabit our world. An example that I find paradigmatic is that of mythology: it emerged as a way to try to explain those aspects that we needed to understand (why do we die, why does an earthquake happen or why has the harvest been destroyed); although they have been scientifically discredited as ways of explaining material reality, they survived because they explain more profound aspects of human relations and of the world in which we live.

Furthermore, **through fantasy both children and adults find meaning in a real world that often seems to us to be uncertain, difficult to decipher or directly incomprehensible**. Since, according to the phrase attributed to Mark Twain, the main difference between reality and fiction is that fiction makes sense.

This poetic dimension is relevant for everyone but Michèle Petit shows us how it becomes essential for children in situations of vulnerability: how can they believe the educational promise if they cannot think beyond their immediate reality? How can they think that the effort being demanded of them makes sense if they cannot imagine themselves in other possible worlds? From this perspective, Petit (2024: 47) poses a challenge: "to return fantasy to the school reality -and to reality in general-, via a space in which we can fantasise, a place where anything is possible".

6. THE DANGER OF PEDAGOGISATION

Children's literature has historically been linked to a moralist logic that has changed in form according to the periods:

Children's literature, as a system, has still not broken away from the didactic concept (...) There is still a long way to go before it is legitimised in its own right and not only seen as a vehicle for transmitting values. There is no doubt that literature, like any other art, struggles between aesthetic and ethical elements, but when the didactic and pedagogical elements are more important than the aesthetic ones, we are dealing with a type of literature that does not function as an art, and even when it does, it does so in addition to the educational intention (Nahum 2022: 47-48).

Following the thread of this tradition of understanding children's books from the logic of the "secular sermon" (Benítez to Nahum 2022: 9), at present we can observe a vast production of books that have the explicit goal of addressing the topics of emotions or inequalities. Eva Martínez is critical of the idea of looking for books that serve to address certain topics such as jealousy or death:

good literature transcends functionality, it does not serve or it should not serve anything at all; reading literature with the pretext of solving something, or of explaining an emotion, or a condition, is making a very limited use of this art. Stories should not serve to give lessons, they are not created with a didactic purpose; rather their value lies in everything that they reflect on the complexity of humans and that -by being listened to or read- echo with something much deeper (Martínez 2017: 16-7).

In contrast to prescription-books or children's books that are

a version of adults' self-help books (see chapter 5), what Eva Martínez proposes is **to promote books that help children to be in contact with their emotions instead of telling them what they should feel and what they have to do with their feelings**: "The idea is that based on their life experience they can develop strategies to learn how to experience everything they feel, move through it, and then -and only then- structure their learning" (Martínez 2017: 18).



7. THE DANGER OF DISINFECTING

At this point we will reconsider an aspect that Pippi mentioned very eloquently in the prologue: what do we do with the books that reproduce stereotypes and reinforce inequalities? A gap can open here between those who defend the autonomy of art and those who prioritise a social reading of literature: the conflict between aesthetics and ethics that we referred to above. When aesthetics take priority, we do not observe how the literature reproduces inequalities and we can find it difficult to review the standard established by books that are relevant for our culture from an intersectional perspective.² In contrast, when we prioritise ethics, we can underestimate the potential of art, make very literal interpretations and drift into strategies such as rewriting and cancelling books and authors.

We suggest understanding the ethics-aesthetics conflict as a productive tension from which we can propose educational strategies related to inequalities and literature. And in this regard, **we consider conversation to be a better tool than prohibition, rewriting or the imposition of a certain interpretation, since conversation helps us to recognise the diversity of ways of understanding one same text, it helps us to differ, to debate, to listen to ourselves and each other.**

A CONVERSATION

The idea of a conversation is crucial in the project as a methodology but also as an epistemological stance (see chapters 12 and 14), as a way of understanding that knowledge needs to be built through dialogue so that it is alive, so that it is meaningful for the people taking part; so that it enables children to come up with questions instead of limiting them to answer questions posed by adults; so that it is not a secular sermon that establishes how a text should be interpreted, what emotion we should feel or how we should

act, but instead conversation questions us and gives us room to listen to ourselves, to learn, to move through uncomfortable feelings, to accept that we do not have magical answers. In this vein, Sara K. Ahmed suggests how to deal with these uncomfortable moments:

we'll work together to address these moments during, after, and most important, before they arise. Not with silence, or glossing over, or punishment. Instead, we will give ourselves permission to create learning conditions where kids can ask the questions they want to ask, muddle through how to say the things they are thinking, and have tough conversations (Ahmed 2018: 26).

According to the author, this requires being able to hold moments of tension, to withstand uncomfortable silences, and to allow the students to have emotionally intense conversations without immediately trying to tone them down (Ahmed 2018: 34-5).

Conversation breaks the traditional hierarchical educational relationship and, in addition, it is essential for three further reasons. The first is that often we address the topic of inequality from the perspective of asking the student what should be done, what can be said and not said, without daring to explore the underlying reasons that have led to that insult or that shove. The risk is that the students learn what can be said and what cannot be said (at least when there are adults present) but that we cannot accompany them in the transformation of the conditions behind it.

The second reason is that conversation is especially necessary in literary learning as, like any art form, its meaning is open; as stated by authors such as Umberto Eco (1994) among many others. In contrast to the ways of addressing literature as if the adult knew the true meaning of the text, we understand that the meaning is a subject up for debate. Who determines it: the person who wrote it? The person who studied it? Each person who reads it and interprets it according to their own filter?

2. See chapter 7 and take a look at the Toolbox activities that invite us to carry out a diagnosis of our library.

As Eva Martínez states about the character of Alice in Wonderland:

It is about, as Alice proposes, stepping through the mirror and learning. And thus, when we are sure about what we feel, we might be able to remember that the truth is not in the mirror, but in what each person has learned from their journey (Martínez 2017: 31).

This is a fascinating but also challenging question, as it leads us to accept a gap in the learning process and a narcissist wound for the educator: it reminds us that there is something unpredictable in the act of reading (and in teaching), that as teachers we cannot control everything the students learn or how they internalise it.

And the third reason to defend conversation is that, beyond classrooms, we are in a socio-political context in which being educated and reasoning is particularly difficult, since as Daniel Nahum reminds us, we are in an era:

in which decodifying does not go through instances of measure and reason, but rather, a generalised cognitive distortion can be perceived as a result of the increase in radical narcissism, that hinders true dialogue, and that installs, taking the place of exchange, personal truths anchored to a way of seeing reality that does not allow change in the way dialogue enables it (Nahum 2023: 33-34).

In this context, training students and training ourselves as adults (whether in the role of a teacher, parent...) in the practice of conversation becomes an urgent necessity.

THE ZOOM OUT PROJECT

This Handbook is part of the Zoom Out project, co-financed by the European Commission within the Erasmus+ call. It is a project that seeks to promote critical thinking, addressing European children's literature from an intersectional perspective. To bring it to life, a consortium of partners from four different countries (Spain, Croatia, Italy and Poland) has worked collaboratively: a university (University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia) as the coordinator, three associations (Fundacja

Laboratorium Zmiany, Petit Philosophy and SCOSSE), four schools (La Sínia and Joan Miró schools, Fundacja Artem Silesiam Promovere and Osnovna skola Josip Pupacic) and two educational cooperatives (Artijoc and Il Pungiglione).

Therefore, the idea of conversation that we propose above is not only a theoretical principle but it is the raw material of the project itself, which is being woven out of dialogue between different types of members who, from different contexts and points of view, come together to develop practical approaches and activities that allow us to move forward in fostering this critical dialogue.

The text is structured into four main sections. The first, "*Bastian Enters the Bookshop*", explores how we approach children's literature and the ways it can be integrated into classroom practice. The second section, "*Ronja Jumps the Rift and Sees the World from the Other Side*", focuses on understanding inequalities and how intersectional perspective can inform literary work with primary school children.

Next, in "*Hansel and Gretel Eat the Witch's House*," the chapters bring together methodological considerations and propose strategies for classroom intervention. The fourth section, "*Trunchbull Is Blasted Out the Window*," presents the experiences and challenges of the four schools involved in the project, as they explore how to address inequalities through children's literature. Finally, the epilogue, titled "*The Echo of Unwritten Truths*," gives voice to the characters who step out of their books to engage in dialogue about how they are represented.

The Handbook gives a framework to the Toolbox, which brings together the different educational resources created in dialogue with primary education teachers and students, and with students from the Teaching Degree. And the third reference material is the collection of Promising Practices, that gathers experiences that we find to be inspiring when addressing the theme of the project.

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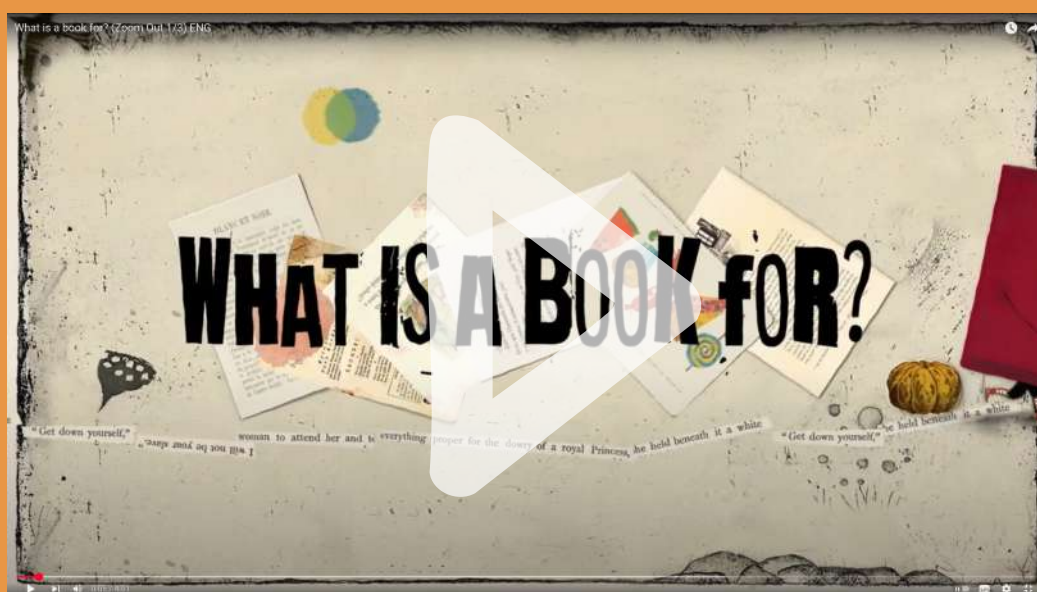
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BASTIAN ENTERS THE BOOKSHOP: APPROACHING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Who would have told Bastian Balthazar Bux, as he ran to escape his bullies, that taking refuge in that bookshop would change his life? The impulse to steal *The NeverEnding Story* would lead him into incredible adventures, where reality and fiction would begin to blur.

Following Bastian's impulse, this section explores how we can approach children's literature and how it can be meaningfully worked with in the classroom.

Before we continue, we invite you to watch the project video where we explain our approach to the topic.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jx_somgWNt4&t=6s

**SCAN THE QR CODE
TO WATCH THE VIDEO**



2

Introduction to Children's Literature: Towards a Definition

Auba Llompart (Universitat de Vic-Universitat Central de Catalunya)

At the outset of our project, a pivotal question emerged: which children's books should we include, and which should we set aside? What criteria should guide these decisions? How can we navigate this process without veering into censorship? From the beginning, our objective was clear—we sought to spotlight quality children's literature. But what exactly constitutes quality in this context? And before we even address that, how do we define children's literature itself?

This chapter endeavors to establish a solid framework, articulating the principles and criteria underpinning our selection process. Join us as we delve into the intricate world of children's literature, unraveling its complexities and exploring these fundamental questions.

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE: DEFINING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

In *The Hidden Adult*, children's literature scholar Perry Nodelman points out that the first challenge one encounters when attempting to define this genre is how unusual a category it is, for it "defines an audience rather than a time or a place or a specific type of writing like romance or tragedy" (2008: 3). Indeed, the answer to the question "what is children's literature?" may appear to be a simple one—we may assume that children's literature is a body of texts that is widely read by children. But let us examine two books that are widely accepted to be 'children's literature classics': Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and J. M. Barrie's novel *Peter Pan* (1911). Who reads them nowadays? Do twenty-first-century children still read Carroll and Barrie? Probably not or, if they do, they might read abridged or Disneyfied versions. On the other hand, many adults—teachers, librarians, literature students—*have* read and

enjoyed these classics later in life. Does this mean that *Alice* and *Peter Pan* are actually adult literature? Did they start out as children's books only to 'become' adult literature over time?

Although its young readership seems to be the genre's defining characteristic, the examples above suggest otherwise, as several critics before us have noted. Jack Zipes, for example, claims that "children's literature does not exist. If we take the genitive case literally" (2001: 39). Children's literature is not produced by children¹, they often do not even choose what they read and, when they do, their choices might not even be regarded as 'literature' by adults. Zipes mentions "cartoons, texts of sports cards, stories that accompany dolls (...), board games, gum wrappers, comic books, leaflets and booklets that accompany tapes and CDs" as the types of texts that many children are exposed to (2001: 58). Would we classify these texts as children's literature? Probably not. As Zipes puts it, "this is not the children's literature that we commonly assume when we use the expression" (2001: 58). Furthermore, "claiming that anything any child ever reads is children's literature is a seriously counterproductive move. (...) It prevents any development of understanding of what adults most often mean—what has most cultural power—when they use the phrase 'children's literature'" (Nodelman, 2008: 4). Thus, **the genitive case is deceptive, for children do not really own children's literature.**

Another problem of defining the genre by its audience is that many children's books are actually mostly read by adults, as in the aforementioned cases of *Alice* and *Peter Pan*. For instance, "If a student studies for a Ph.D. in the field of children's literature in a department of English at a university (...), he or she faces reading more books produced

1. One exception to this is Editorial Cabeza Hueca, a Chilean publisher "for children by children" (editorialcabezahueca), managed by twelve-year-old publisher and illustrator Emilia Aravena. Cabeza Hueca specializes in publishing children's books written by children. Their current titles are *Canelo KO* (2021) by Amazo Zúñiga and *El chanchito Lodín* (2022) by Amatista Sánchez. Both authors were ten years old when their books were published. Currently, Cabeza Hueca is a one-of-a-kind publishing firm, but who knows—maybe it will pave the way for more children to become more active participants in the creation and production of children's literature?

for young readers than any young person will ever read" (Zipes, 2001: 74). And what about those adults who nostalgically revisit the books of their childhood? Consider the case of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997 - 2007). At the present time, it is quite likely that the *Harry Potter* fandom includes more adults than children—adults who were children or teenagers when the novels (and the films) came out. Thus, their main readership has shifted over time, and yet we would still affirm that these novels are children's literature; we still perceive them as such. We must therefore conclude that defining the genre by its audience does not really help us understand what we actually mean when we talk about children's literature.

Another possible approach is to define the genre by its observable shared characteristics (McDowell, 1973: 54): children's books are short, simple in style, optimistic and action-driven; its main characters are children, to whom the child reader can relate; and they usually feature fantasy elements like talking animals, magical objects, fantasy worlds and so on. In order to put this definition to the test, we will now briefly analyze and compare six works of children's literature: the Grimms' *Children's and Household Tales* (1812), Carroll's *Alice*, Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), Hergé's *Tintin* comic book series (1929 - 1976), Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Elvira Lindó's *Manolito Gafotas* (1994 - 2012). Although all these books are categorized as children's literature, none meets all the features outlined above. While *Charlie*, *Alice* and *Harry Potter* feature fantasy elements and worldbuildings, *Manolito Gafotas* is set in a real working-class neighborhood in Madrid. *Charlie*, *Alice* and *Manolito* are child protagonists, but *Tintin* and *Cinderella* are not. The Grimms' fairy tales are short and stylistically simple (at least apparently), but the *Harry Potter* books are long, and Carroll's *Alice* is more complex in style and content than many adult books will ever be. Incidentally, we strongly oppose the idea that, if a children's book is complex inasmuch as it addresses philosophical questions or complicated topics that appeal to adults, it is not actually for children, or it is but only *on the surface*. **We believe that children's**

literature can be philosophical, complicated and intellectual because we trust that children are capable of being all these things.

While the characteristics we have outlined are indeed common children's literature conventions, they are by no means essential or defining. They vary depending on the target audience's age—picture books for very small children have very little to do with middle-grade novels, for example—and also the time and place in which a particular book is written. In the American English translation of *Manolito Gafotas*, glasses of wine and other alcoholic beverages have been turned into cups of coffee or Cokes, and scatological and violent humour has been toned down (Cámara, 2016). Whereas no one batted an eye at these references to alcohol, physical punishments and offensive nicknames in 1990s Spain, for the American public such content is markedly adult and does not belong in a children's book. In the US children's literature market, *Manolito Gafotas* qualifies as children's literature only as long as this content is erased, toned down or modified.

Moving back to our list of 'observable characteristics', another problem that arises is that it only applies to works of narrative fiction, excluding poetry, drama and knowledge books.





Although in this project we concentrate on narrative fiction, the definition we seek to establish here is one that embraces the broad spectrum of texts written for children, without excluding those that constitute a significant portion of the genre, such as nursery rhymes or nonfiction picture books. This further reinforces the need to give up the attempt to create a definitive 'list of characteristics', as none of the outlined features can be regarded as universal conventions of children's literature. Notably, all the works that we have compared are European children's texts. Expanding the scope to include texts from other cultures would only make it even more challenging to identify a set of shared features.

Following these two unsuccessful attempts to define the genre, it is worth noting that children's literature has also been defined as a mere commercial label. As John Rowe Townsend states, "The only practical definition of a children's book today—absurd as it sounds—is 'a book which appears on the children's list of a publisher'" (1971: 10). This statement has interesting implications: it focuses on the adult, rather than the child, and it raises the question of what it is that makes us adults classify some books as children's literature. What must a children's book have for us to deem it appropriate for a child to read? The fact that children's literature is used as a commercial label should not lead us to give up the attempt to define it, but should be taken as a starting point. Let us now examine the implications of viewing this genre as an *adult* activity based on adult ideas of what children are, what children need and what children should be.

Nodelman states that "children's literature is

written by adults and (...) it is what it is because of how it addresses its audience, because of what adults believe children are" (2008: 151). The most satisfying definition of children's literature we have encountered is this author's assertion that "it is a genre of literature whose defining characteristics can be accounted for by conventional assumptions about and constructions of childhood" (2008: 188). Such assumptions, he adds, are by no means immutable or universally true and, as a consequence, neither are the genre's textual features (2008: 188). What is universally true, though, is the fact that children's literature is constructed in accordance with adult views of childhood, and these views shape the texts.

The danger of this definition, however, is that we might end up reducing children's literature to a mere adult imposition, even an evil strategy, to control, homogenize and 'colonize' children. Jacqueline Rose, for instance, proposes that "If children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book" (1994: 1-2). Along similar lines, Maria Nikolajeva claims that "'lending out a voice' to a silenced minority is unethical, because the author is in any case writing from a superior position and cannot adopt the minority's subjectivity. (...) lending a voice always means usurping the voice" (2002: 186). The reason why we cannot establish a clear parallel between the adult-child hierarchy and other power relations will be examined in more detail in Chapter 7. For now, let us just say that we firmly believe that, if done right, children's literature can be liberating for the children (and the adults) who read it.



The genre will probably never be free from the presence and control of adults, just like adults will always be present in and in control of children's lives to a certain extent. But in the same way that there are positive and negative models of teaching and parenting, we believe we can identify positive and negative ways of writing for children, which takes us to our next fundamental question.

GOOD BOOKS FOR BAD CHILDREN: DEFINING GOOD CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

What is good children's literature? Again, this question may seem to have a rather straightforward answer: a good children's book is one that is widely read and enjoyed by children. But the truth is that children's literary tastes are hardly ever taken seriously. Are we ready to accept that R. L. Stine's *Goosebumps* series (1992 – present) and the *Paw Patrol* or Disney book adaptations are superior to our beloved children's literature classics? If the answer is 'no', we cannot claim that the quality of a children's book is determined only by its success among child readers. While it may be impossible to arrive at a universally accepted definition of good children's literature, we will nonetheless attempt to establish one—or, at the very least, clarify what we mean when we, as members of this project, refer to good children's books.

In his essay "On Three Ways of Writing for Children", C. S. Lewis said "I am almost inclined to set it up as a canon that a children's story which

is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story. The good ones last" (2006 [1952]: 19). This raises another widespread assumption: a good children's book is one that both children and adults enjoy. But then again, as Adam Gidwitz² rightfully wonders, "why should this be true? If we are asking what makes a good book for children, why should we care what adults think of it at all?" (2016: online). We could argue that, since adults constitute a significant portion of the actual readership of children's literature, their perspectives on the matter cannot be overlooked. But what does it mean that a children's story is enjoyed by both children and adults? What is it that resonates with both age groups?

After Puffin Books' announcement that they would republish Roald Dahl's books for 'modern sensitivities', Spanish author Elvira Lindo said in defence of the original versions: "Good children's literature must be transgressive, subversive and non-didactic in some way, allowing children to enter a space of complete autonomy" (2023: online). This reminds us of children's book editor Ursula Nordstrom's "good books for bad children", a phrase she used "to contrast the edgy, challenging books she published for children with more conventional sorts of children's books that sentimentalized childhood" (Marcus, 1998: xviii).³ Indeed, both children and adults are drawn to elements of transgression and subversion in literature, and an excess of didacticism or moralizing risks alienating both age groups. But

2. Adam Gidwitz (b. 1982) is an American children's author, best known for his *A Tale Dark & Grimm* series (2010 – 2013).

3. Many books that have become children's classics were edited by Nordstrom, such as E. B. White's *Stuart Little* (1945) and *Charlotte's Web* (1952) and Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), among many others.

what exactly should a “good book for bad children” transgress and subvert?

After careful consideration, we have concluded that a key element to subvert in a good children's book is the power dynamic between the child and the adult. It is therefore not so much a matter of content, but the way the implicit adult in the text treats the implicit child. A book may teach a positive lesson or promote an ideology that we support, but if it talks down to children—if the delivery of this lesson is paternalistic, condescending or dumbed down, it will not be a good children's book because the implicit adult is not being respectful with the implicit child. An example of this dumbing down of children's literature is the recent proliferation of books about handling emotions, a topic which we will expand in Chapter 5. In contrast, **in a good children's book, the adult trusts and respects the child, acknowledging their individuality, allowing space for their transgressions and desires, and valuing their intelligence.** A children's book should not serve as a space for adults to consciously impose their views on children; in other words, it should not be a platform for adult agendas. Instead, we agree with Lewis's view that the primary reason for writing a children's story should be that “a children's story is the best art-form for something you have to say: just as a composer might write a Dead March not because there was a public funeral in view but because certain musical ideas that had occurred to him went best into that form” (2006 [1952]: 18). Children's literature must be respected and taken seriously as an art form, thereby showing respect for its audience in turn. All in all, a good children's book can explore virtually any topic—it can be realistic or fantastical, long or short, classic or contemporary, funny or sad. What matters is not so much what is being told, but *how* it is being told.

We would like to clarify that we are aware that a certain degree of didacticism is practically unavoidable in children's literature because, as we have seen in the previous section, this genre conforms to what adults believe children need, and most adults believe children need to be taught by them. However, there are different ways of approaching this didacticism, and the approach we endorse is one that is deeply intertwined

with transgression and subversion—one that is understood as intellectually challenging children, making them think and reconsider. According to fairy tale expert Bruno Bettelheim,

For a story to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. (1991 [1975]: 5)

Along the same lines, Gidwitz highlights that “Kids will like a book with a great story. But they will only love a book that makes them see the world in a new way” (2016: online).

Now that we have reached the end of our journey down the rabbit hole of children's literature, a question remains unanswered: what about the adult who reads children's books? If a good children's book puts so much emphasis on the child's interests, what is in it for adults? We are confident that, if a book accomplishes what we have outlined above, it is highly likely that it will please both adults and children. For one thing, those who read good children's books when they were little will probably still cherish them and perhaps revisit them when they grow up. As for those who discover a good children's book later in life, they may be drawn to it because the interests of adults and children are not as different from each other as we may assume. Adults also appreciate not being talked down to, we enjoy elements of transgression and subversion, we read because we want to be entertained, we enjoy texts that expand our minds and imaginations, we do not like to be lectured, and we sometimes feel powerless, even oppressed, like children. It is therefore not surprising that some of us enjoy children's books and find it easy to relate to the implicit child in the text. It is also no surprise that, at times, a children's story is the best art form for expressing ourselves. Thus, **whether good children's books are discovered in childhood or adulthood, whether they appeal to a real child or an ‘inner child’, as Lewis said, “The good ones last” just like all great literature.**

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3

Some Ideas for Working with Literature in the Primary Classroom

Mia Güell (Universitat de Vic-Universitat Central de Catalunya)

Literature speaks about life and often becomes a personal and universal mirror which can be at the same time comforting and worrying. This is why it is so important for it to be very present in classrooms, because from the very beginning it has been an essential tool for “humanization and culturalization, indispensable for building oneself as individuals and as a community” (Colomer 2005: 12). Among the functions of literature in the primary classroom, Teresa Colomer (1999) highlights three basic ones:

1. Access to the real world and the confirmation of a sense of belonging to this world, to a specific culture, to an imaginary world connected mainly through oral literature which has been passed down from generation to generation.
2. The articulated representation of the world that serves as an instrument of socialization, where children share feelings and sensations with the characters in the stories and realize that they are not alone, that they are part of a group.
3. The development of narrative, poetic, and dramatic learning forms through which the literary discourse is conveyed.

For this individual and collective construction to take place satisfactorily, good guidance from the educator is necessary. Here are some ideas to introduce literature more and better in the classroom:

PASSION FOR LITERATURE

If the educators are passionate about it, they transmit this feeling to the students, who will want to participate in this enthusiasm, at least, out of curiosity. It is advisable for literature to be present in the classroom every day in some way. One strategy could be to arrive each morning with different books in hand, leave them visible on the



table, and read a fragment, even if it has nothing to do with what will be explained later, but justifying why it caught our attention and why we want to share it with the students. This way, we empower them, and they can express their opinions. The more we link them to their reality, to the world they inhabit, the more interest it will have for the children. This practice is very similar to the one proposed by the educator, teacher, and writer Emili Teixidor. When he arrived in the classroom, he wrote a different verse on the blackboard every day and waited attentively for the students' reaction. He documented this in *The Pleasure of Reading*:

Why don't we write on the blackboards of schools or on the boards of libraries, under the day, month, and year, or instead, a verse, just one line from a good poet even if the students do not fully understand it. Just surprising them with a word, a phrase, a sound is enough. They do not necessarily have to understand

everything. It's like a gift; those who want to stop can do so; those who do not understand it, move on. The renewal of the daily verse has a surprising effect (2012: 25-26).

It is about introducing curiosity for what is literary in a natural way.

LITERATURE IS A PLEASURE, SOMETIMES

Avoid didacticism, morals (unless it's a fable, and if it is, let the moral be expressed through idioms that link popular wisdom to the content, far from the stiff didacticism of the 18th century) and let everyone take what benefits them the most. We should stay away from Disney's sweetness, which responds more to marketing strategies than literary solvency, and read for fun. Reading is a difficult act at the beginning, it is not fun, but good guidance makes it easier until it is mastered. Expressive reading aloud helps make texts that may not be very intelligible more understandable.

We must dedicate the necessary time to it, it is not worth reducing it to the last five minutes of class if there is still a little time left or while we wait for everyone to finish an assigned task. We must give it the importance it deserves, not reduce it to filling empty moments.

ORAL LITERATURE / WRITTEN LITERATURE

It is necessary to tell traditional stories, even though most of them are currently considered politically incorrect. They require proper presentation and mediation. These are references that need to be known and explained because they are part of our imagination: however, they need to be known and explained from the construction of a critical perspective, valuing them in terms of literary education and not ideology. **We should also tell tales from everywhere, to reach the conclusion that although cultural details and context change, we end up telling the same stories whether they are from the north, south, east, or west, because the themes that concern people have been the same since time immemorial.** It is important to involve families, so

there is an enriching cultural exchange to "listen to plural stories, discover unique arts, share them, and encourage everyone to feel the desire to also get to know other cultures, other stories. [...] to learn from the other, to listen to them so that they can find a country" (Petit 2024: 63).

A story told before the child is ready to listen to it is a lost story. Roser Ros (2022) highlights the importance of respecting the suitability of stories to the developmental stage of children:

- **Between 5 and 7 years old**, wonderful tales are preferred. Introduction of stories where cunning plays an important role. Suitable stories for this age group would be: *The Bremen Town Musicians, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, The Brave Little Tailor, Puss in Boots...*
- **Between 7 and 9 years old**, the interest in wonderful tales and oral tradition stories continues, for texts with ironic elements, introduction of more complicated plots, more characters, legends. The most suitable tales would be: *The Love for Three Oranges, The Goose Girl, Aladdin, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, The Emperor's New Clothes*, etc., and all stories where the protagonist's cunning manages to deceive the antagonist.
- **From 9 years old**, children usually like tales of vanished cultures or distant places, with unique and unpredictable plots. Ingenious and complex plots with unexpected endings. The taste for humor and/or irony increases. And for elements of fear, humor, or sentimentality. From this age, it is ideal to introduce all kinds of mythical and legendary stories from around the world. Examples of suitable stories from 9 years old would be: *Alice in Wonderland, Pippi Longstocking, Treasure Island, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, etc.



READING ALOUD

The teacher must read aloud, mastering the technique. This not only makes children understand and enjoy reading more but also motivates them to read this way at home. Reading aloud helps develop reading comprehension, fluency, and oral expression.

CLASSROOM, SCHOOL, NEIGHBORHOOD LIBRARY

A good classroom library (and school and neighborhood library) increases the chances that students connect with literature and facilitates access to books for everyone under the same conditions. We encourage visits to the neighborhood library as a systematic activity, with regular visits and tasks related to reading, so that children become familiar with the space and the possibilities it offers.

Having books of all genres in the classroom library—poetry, albums, narrative, illustrated books, comics, graphic novels, manga, magazines, and discovery books—will allow all children to find something that catches their attention, or they like and feel represented. A diverse offering promotes inclusion and helps develop a love for reading in all students. Gianni Rodari, in the fourth chapter of *The Grammar of Fantasy* (1973), refers to nine ways to teach children to hate reading, one of which is not offering enough variety.

We would like to emphasize the importance of picture books at all ages, not just for the early stages. It is a genre that, as stated in the tenth of the 11 reasons for the picture book in the *Manifesto of the Picture Book*⁴ (2016), “invites you to stop and contemplate the world, to recognize the clues and details hidden in the images. A picture book stops time, invites you to be reflective.” Along these lines, Evelyn Arizpe describes some projects based on the benefits of picture books in the classroom for newly arrived students who do not master the school’s vehicular language and analyzes how the picture books “managed to activate a series of cognitive

and affective processes in the readers, regardless of the language level and cultural gaps the readers had. These studies reveal how readers can create connections between their previous literacy experiences and their culture, and how they can intensify the meanings generated by their peers” (2010: 163).

THEMATIC DIVERSITY

A good book can be the basis for addressing any topic, both emotional and social, without the need to resort to specific books about emotions typical of tutoring sessions. Forget the idea of associating colors to emotions. Personal experiences are unique and non-transferable; you cannot explain what a loss means to a child who has not lost anyone, they will not understand it. **Good literature speaks of life, there is love and death and pain and joy and friendship and jealousy. Each child will identify these emotions based on their own experiences and perceive the story from their perspective.** This allows literature to be relevant to all of them, regardless of their personal experiences. Ellen Duthie commented that

The tendency towards excessive literalness when selecting books suitable for thinking about certain topics is not a new pandemic evil, it was already suffered in pre-COVID times, as if to think about death or friendship the most suitable books had to preferably have the word death or friendship in the title. But the good books for reflection are those that allow us to discover very diverse situations and contexts, those that offer us moments of identification, escape, and reflection (2020: 35).

It is essential to provide the classroom with books that allow children to go beyond what can be interpreted at first glance, to delve into metaphors, personifications, comparisons, wordplay, intertextuality, and let their imagination run free. Symbolic language allows each child, according to their cultural maturity and life experience, to discern what the text or image in front of them explains.

4. The independent children's publishers of Barcelona came together for a party on December 14, 2016 to start a new path together and give visibility and social relevance to the picture book. They invited to this party all those who make the picture book possible: authors, illustrators, translators, booksellers, librarians, distributors, teachers, reading promoters, readers, personalities and people in the sector. The manifesto emerged from this initiative.

Children need to feel represented in the books they choose, so we must ensure that diversity in all senses is reflected and move away from stereotypical literature. If it is present, it should be to discuss its content.

LITERATURE EVERYWHERE

In the classroom, the reading space must be comfortable. The more pleasant it is, the easier it will be for them. Cushions, rugs, spaces that allow some privacy, such as tents or special cubicles, are ideal for letting the imagination run free. Malaguzzi stated that space is the third educator, after the children themselves and the adults in the family and school.

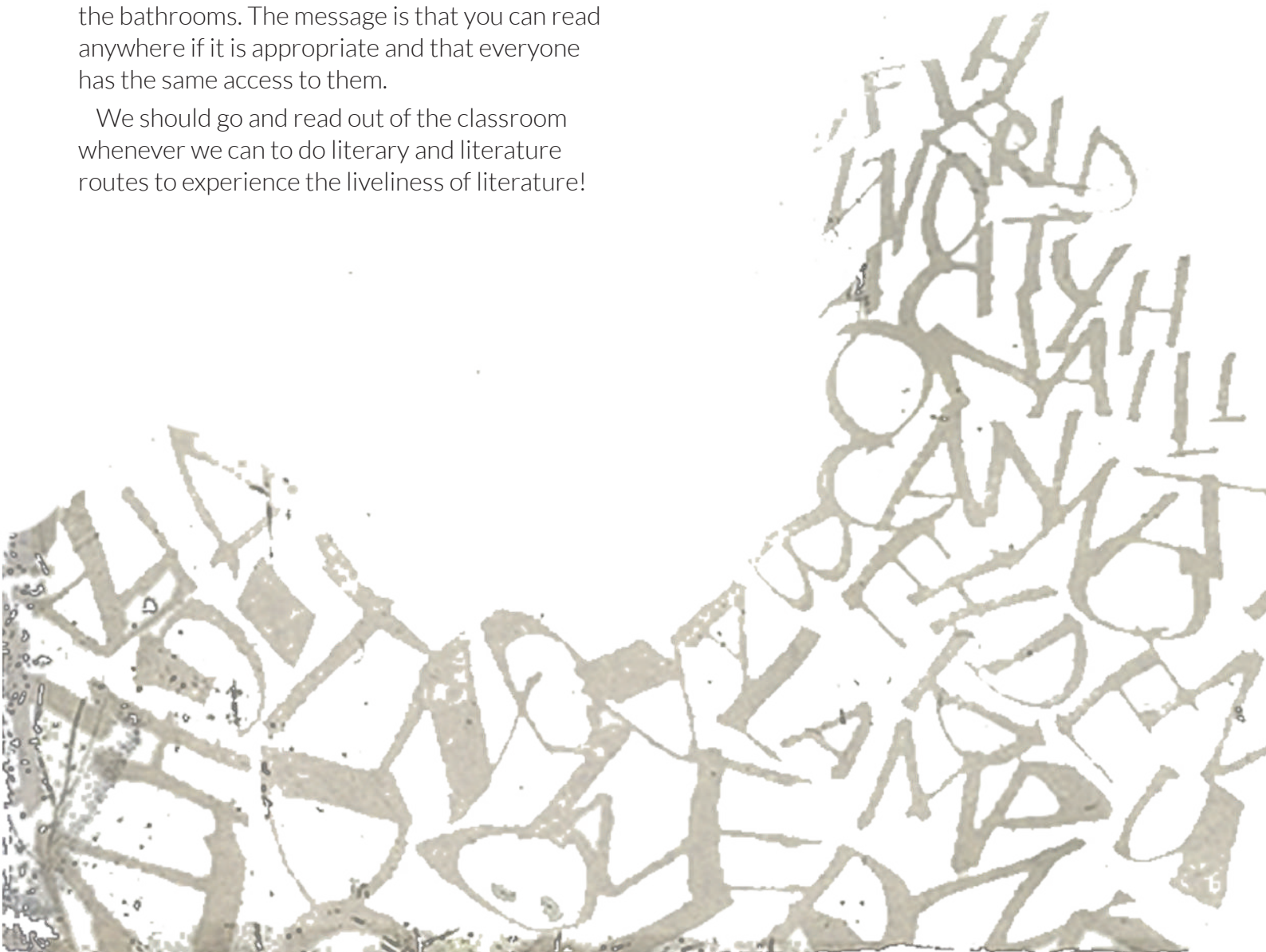
Apart from the books in the classroom and school library, we should distribute varied books throughout the school. Books should be present everywhere: in the classroom, in the hallways, on the stairs, in the playground, and even, why not, in the bathrooms. The message is that you can read anywhere if it is appropriate and that everyone has the same access to them.

We should go and read out of the classroom whenever we can to do literary and literature routes to experience the liveliness of literature!

TRANSVERSALITY OF LITERATURE

We should not limit literature to the time slot dedicated to reading promotion; it can be integrated into any subject. Literary texts can be used to accompany history, science, art... Literature can be the basis of interdisciplinary projects. For example, after reading a historical novel, students can investigate the era in which it is set, create artistic projects inspired by the book, or write their own stories. This allows children to explore topics from different perspectives and develop various skills. Understanding it with this approach fosters multidisciplinary education and helps children distinguish the connections between different areas of knowledge.

Let's put literature into children's lives; in this way, we will guarantee them a better future without any doubt.



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4

Philosophical Approach to Children's Literature: Understanding the Other

Filip Škifić (Udruga Mala filozofija)

Children's literature is not merely a source of entertainment or a tool for literacy development; it significantly shapes how young minds perceive the world. It prompts ethical reflection, shapes values, and nurtures social responsibility. Engaging with children's narratives from a philosophical perspective allows us to address fundamental questions about identity, difference, and moral responsibility. How do children come to understand those who are different from themselves? What role does literature play in reinforcing or challenging stereotypes? Can storytelling instil an ethical obligation towards the Other? This suggests that children's literature is not simply a reflection of societal norms but an active force that shapes cognitive and moral development by exploring inclusion, exclusion, and ethics.

The central hypothesis of this chapter posits that children's literature serves as a cognitive and ethical lens through which young readers develop an understanding of the Other. Narratives that depict alterity help to form cognitive schemas that either support or challenge existing biases. By analysing language, story structures, and

character representation, children's literature fosters empathy, ethical reasoning, and critical thinking, establishing it as a vital resource for moral and cognitive development.

THE CONCEPT OF THE OTHER

The concept of the "Other" has been extensively explored in philosophy, particularly within existentialist, phenomenological, and post-colonial frameworks. Emmanuel Levinas contends that the face of the Other demands ethical recognition and responsibility (Levinas, 1969). Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), investigates how self-identity is formed through interactions with the Other, often resulting in alienation. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) critiques the ways in which cultural representations influence perceptions of the Other, thereby reinforcing stereotypes and power imbalances.

Cognitive psychology complements these ideas by exploring how narratives shape a child's understanding of social differences. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) posits that children accept behavioural patterns and social categorisations from their surroundings, including literature. Literature has the potential to either normalise the Other or perpetuate exclusionary viewpoints.

In children's literature, the Other manifests in various forms: the outsider, the marginalised, or even fantastical entities. Such portrayals can either reinforce stereotypes or encourage young readers to adopt diverse perspectives. Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), for instance, enables readers to empathise with creatures initially viewed as monstrous, reflecting Levinas' ethical call to recognise humanity in difference.

Deborah Ellis' *The Breadwinner* (2000) offers a nuanced depiction of the Other by portraying an Afghan girl's resilience under Taliban rule. Rather



than exoticising the Other, the novel humanises its characters, in line with Levinas' philosophy of ethical responsibility. By immersing readers in Parvana's reality, the novel cultivates empathy without reducing its characters to simplistic stereotypes.

Noam Chomsky's (1965) theory of universal grammar suggests that the capacity for language is inherent, providing a profound structural foundation that precedes and shapes individual linguistic expression. This implies that from an early age, cognitive structures are influenced not only by the mechanics of language but also by the semantic and syntactic frameworks through which meaning is articulated. **Children's literature, as a primary vehicle for linguistic and cognitive development, embeds implicit structures of inclusion and exclusion, often framing the Other through specific lexical choices, narrative viewpoints, and descriptive schemas that reinforce or challenge dominant cultural paradigms.**

The recurring patterns in language – whether through the repetition of stereotypical character traits, binary oppositions, or hierarchical relations – become internalised cognitive heuristics that shape a child's subconscious worldview. **This supports the hypothesis that literature serves not merely as a medium for storytelling but as an active agent in shaping ethical and epistemic orientations, conditioning how young readers perceive and categorise differences on both linguistic and conceptual levels.**

READING FROM AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality reveals how overlapping social identities influence experiences of privilege and marginalization (see chapter 7). In children's literature, intersectionality helps highlight how narratives either reinforce or challenge dominant social norms. For example, Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014) weaves together race, gender, and history to portray the complexities of identity formation. Similarly, R.J. Palacio's *Wonder* (2012) explores disability and social exclusion,

challenging conventional ideas about beauty and belonging. These narratives invite young readers to critically engage with identity and inclusion but it is not that simple to be completely inclusive in creating stories since every story has fixed characters that represent some ideas and unconsciously can become one-dimensional or stereotypically presented.

For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) attempts to generate empathy for enslaved people but also reinforces problematic racial stereotypes. Authors often try to confront the fear of the Other through their characters but may rely too heavily on victimization or generalization. In literature, characters embody ideas, making it difficult to present individuals as both unique and universally complex. For example, Kristian Novak's *Ciganin, ali najljepši* (*Gypsy, but the Fairest of Them All*) seeks to challenge traditional stereotypes by offering a nuanced portrayal of Romani identity. Through elements of magical realism, Novak deconstructs dominant narratives and presents a multifaceted depiction of the Other, encouraging empathy beyond one-dimensional representations.

LITERATURE AS AN ETHICAL AND POLITICAL TOOL

Children's literature plays a crucial role in shaping ideas about justice, equality, and human rights. Martha Nussbaum (2010) argues that literature nurtures the "narrative imagination," helping individuals understand others' experiences and develop a moral consciousness. Stories that depict migration, discrimination, and social justice issues encourage ethical reflection and empathy.

Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006), a wordless novel about immigration, invites readers to empathize with the protagonist's alienation. By removing linguistic barriers, the book universalizes the



immigrant experience, making it relatable across cultures. Such narratives demonstrate how children's literature can inspire social consciousness.

Adopting a philosophical approach to children's literature fosters active engagement rather than passive consumption. Using the Socratic method, educators can encourage students to question biases, narrative structures, and ideological messages in texts. For instance, *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) challenges young readers to consider ethical dilemmas related to freedom and conformity, enhancing their critical thinking skills.

PHILOSOPHICAL PICTURE BOOKS AS A POWERFUL TOOL FOR UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER

Children's picture books play a crucial role in shaping young readers' perceptions of identity, diversity, and empathy, when you mix that with methodology for fostering critical and creative thinking, you get a powerful tool for understanding the Other.

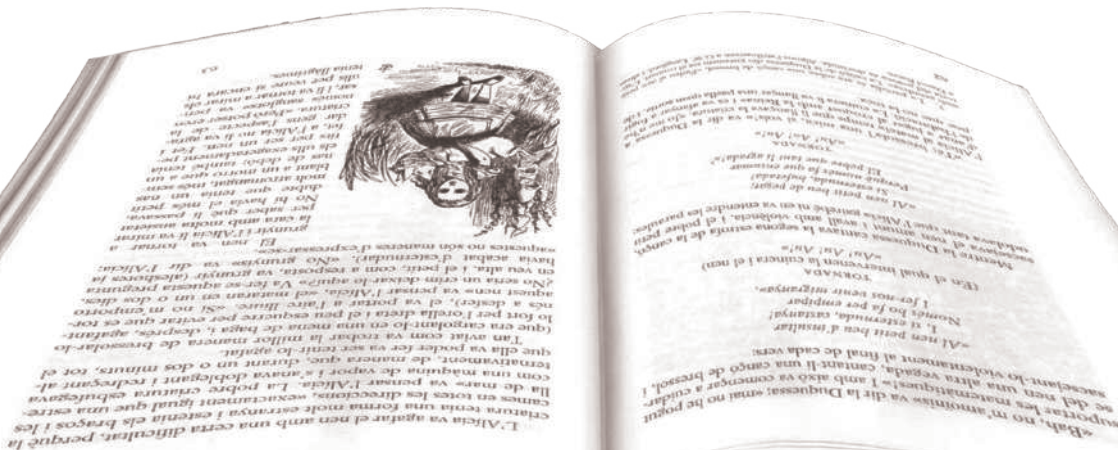
Through engaging narratives and rich illustrations picture books help children develop empathy and challenge stereotypes through cognitive processes (see chapters 6 and 10). They can serve as powerful tools for encouraging young readers to see the world from multiple perspectives, ultimately shaping a more inclusive and compassionate society.

Philosophical picture books offer a unique and powerful means for children to explore complex ideas about identity, difference, and moral reasoning. Unlike traditional educational materials

that focus on information absorption, these books encourage children to think critically, ask questions, and develop their interpretations.

Oscar Brenifier is a notable figure in this field, creating philosophical picture books inviting children to reflect on questions about life, ethics, and relationships. His works present open-ended dilemmas that do not impose a single answer but instead stimulate dialogue and reasoning. It can be a fruitful platform for grasping the concept of the Other since it is written in a neutral tone with multiple perspectives, leading to a greater discussion on how we cannot understand the world without our opposites. By engaging with his texts, children learn to navigate abstract concepts, fostering cognitive flexibility and a deeper understanding of the world they are living in.

Many organizations, including our own (Association Petit Philosophy) actively create and promote such picture books. Our goal is to develop literature that nurtures children's capacity to think rather than passively absorb societal norms. Through carefully crafted narratives, we aim to challenge stereotypes, encourage curiosity, and cultivate a more inclusive worldview. By integrating philosophy into children's literature, we can provide young readers with an alternative framework for engaging with the world – one that values complexity, dialogue, and the richness of diverse perspectives. These approaches can trigger their critical, creative, and even caring thinking at a young age and positively challenge them to examine their surroundings and themselves because Socrates taught us a long time ago that the unexamined life is not worth living.



ETHICS OF STORYTELLING AND EDUCATIONAL POTENTIALS

Children's literature holds a unique power: it does not simply mirror the world but actively constructs how young readers come to understand it. Through storytelling, children encounter the Other – whether in the form of cultural differences, social marginalization, or unfamiliar perspectives – and, in doing so, develop the cognitive and moral frameworks that will shape their interactions with the world. The narratives they absorb can either reinforce existing biases or challenge them, offering new ways of seeing and relating to those who are different. **A philosophical lens allows us to recognize literature not just as a pedagogical tool, but as an ethical space where children learn to navigate questions of identity, justice, and responsibility.** Levinas reminds us that encountering the Other is always an ethical moment, one that demands recognition rather than reduction. Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality highlights how overlapping identities complicate our understanding of difference, while Nussbaum's idea of the "narrative imagination" shows that literature has the potential to cultivate deep empathy. Together, these perspectives reveal how the books we give to children shape not only their knowledge but their capacity for ethical engagement. **At its best, children's literature disrupts simplistic divisions between self and Other, fostering a worldview that is not based on fear or exclusion, but on curiosity, dialogue, and mutual recognition.** This is particularly evident in the growing body of philosophical picture books, which encourage young readers to grapple with complexity rather than passively absorb inherited narratives. By embracing this potential, we do more than educate – we contribute to a more inclusive, thoughtful, and humane society.



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5

Critical Approach to Books Focusing on Emotional Education: Reading with No Purpose (or Reading for the Sake of Reading)

María Alonso Gómez (Artijoc)

Reading empowered me to journey to places with the mind and imagination. Reading expanded my consciousness.

bell hooks

There is no doubt that inequalities and the various conflicts that arise from them —whether they are internal and affect a part or the whole group living together in the classroom— have direct consequences for our emotional well-being. There is also no doubt, in our view, that the resonances and the wide range of representations offered by literature contribute to unravelling how the world and relationships between people work. We know, therefore, that **reading can help us to understand ourselves and others in all our complexity.**

However, opening a conversation about inequalities and literature does not mean, in our opinion, that literature should provide answers or prescribe solutions to emotional conflicts. Far from that, we believe that literature can and does constitute a resource of immense potential to open up ways of exploration, awaken resonances and raise profound questions in a symbolic language that escapes our rationality. Our reading of literary works, as complex representations of life, awakens a multitude of emotions in us and, of course, in our children. **Adults can embrace and accompany what emerges from reading without the need for the story to explain it.**

Given the proliferation in recent years of books aimed at working with and explaining emotions, several concerns arise here. Firstly, we wonder whether there may be confusion as to what we define as a story when we select the titles we wish to offer to children. Therefore, we propose

a reflection on those tensions that may appear between the intentionality and the function of the texts in order to address the difference between (1) the story that is born as a story and, at a given moment, can be used as a didactic resource and (2) the text that is born as a didactic text and, therefore, is written and published with the aim of obtaining a result. The latter, when focused on emotions, could be referred to as 'children's self-help' to differentiate it from the former.

STORIES TO-AN-END AND STORIES TO-NO-END

The children's self-help book would be one that understands language as a possible communicative vehicle to address emotions, it is the work that pretends to be useful, one that 'does not arise from a deep need or from the collective unconscious of a community, but from a moral or didactic intentionality of the author, which will be perceived as a lesson hidden in the guise of a story' (Martínez Pardo 2018). While it is true that such books can be useful in the classroom to illustrate situations or conflicts at certain times, its reading usually offers fewer layers. The fairy tale, on the other hand, understands language as a poetic form, as a symbol, as a space of freedom that transgresses the forms of communicative language and recreates itself in a game with itself without the pretension of reaching any specific place. The story which does not pretend to serve any purpose tends to open up a wider world where there is room for more readings.

This difference should be taken into account by adults when selecting the books we offer. Those texts that we are referring to as children's self-help texts "leave little room for personal transformation: they offer a specific recipe to solve a specific issue" (Martínez Pardo 2018). Children play a passive role and are only receiving the message that the adult sends them with the aim of getting them to do or not to do something. In Carranza's words, "this will, which we could call 'colonising', is usually full of good intentions, and often goes unnoticed, as it is based on ways of thinking about the relationship with children and young that have become second nature in our society" (Carranza: 2020, 4).

On the other hand, the story –understood as a narrative woven with the poetic and symbolic language of literature– takes the form of a much more indefinable space without a specific purpose that opens doors to other possible places and feelings, which will appear immersed in an infinity of emotions... Therefore, any child in possession of the text can travel to other places thanks to the

poetic and metaphorical language of the literary work. **Ultimately, it is a question of trust. If adults have confidence in children's abilities, we can open doors to new places for them to set out on the journey they choose or need to go on.**

Eva Martínez Pardo also tackles the question of the functionality of the short story and she does so on the basis of the definition of 'good literature':

[..]. in reality good literature transcends functionality, it does not serve or should not serve for anything; to consume literature with the pretext of solving something, or of explaining some emotion, or some state, is to make a very limited use of this art. Stories should not be used to give lessons, they are not born with a didactic purpose, but their value is all that they reflect on human complexity and that –when listened to or read– they resonate with something much deeper (Martínez Pardo 2018: 17).

Contemporary philosophy also reflects on this question in relation to the use we make of language when we put it at the disposal of communication and productivity, as the Korean thinker Byung-Chul Han explains:



When the compulsion of production takes hold of language, language enters the mode of work. It withers and becomes a bearer of information, that is merely a means of communication. Information is the active form of language. Poetry, by contrast, suspends language as information. In poetry, language enters the mode of contemplation (Han 2023: 20).

The element of what Han here calls 'activity' as opposed to 'contemplation' seems interesting to us because it also speaks to us of the place where lies the beauty of the useless:

We owe true happiness to the useless and purposeless, to what is intentionally convoluted, what is unproductive, indirect, exuberant, superfluous, to beautiful forms and gestures that have no use and serve no purpose. [...] This 'to-no-end', this freedom from purpose and usefulness, is the essential core of inactivity (Han 2023: 12).

Although we do not intend to enter into great philosophical disquisitions here, we do think it is interesting to introduce this perspective of the useful versus the useless, as it speaks to us of today's tendency and almost imperative need to turn all our movements into actions or products that teach us something or serve a purpose. In this search, we run the risk of succumbing to the capitalist logic that shows opposition to aesthetic and profound experiences when they do not yield immediate and tangible results.

SCHOOL AND STORYTELLING AS A SHELTER FROM HASTE

Another central element in this debate is time. In our age of haste and immediacy, it is hard to trust processes that need time, but experience and reading, like contemplation (Han 2023), require just that: time.

To make sure that not everything is the same is to make sure that there is room for the other. To avoid being colonised by the element that unfolds its dominion requires moving away. To move away to another place where, for example, there is no saturation, and to move away to another experience of time where, for example, there is no hurry. [...] In school, it is necessary to have time. And to have time is to open a parenthesis, a parenthesis to be able to

deal with things themselves, and to make them visible (Esquirol 2024: 23).

The seed that we can sow by filling classrooms with good literature and taking the time to read aloud to small, middle and older children and awaken in them an enthusiasm for reading, will take time to germinate; so much so that we should accept in advance that we may not see it sprout, but we should not question the fact that it will (see chapter 3).

MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OR LITERARY INTERSECTIONALITY

In the same way that we talked about the different axes of inequality and intersectionality as opposed to the monofocal perspective (see chapter 7), stories and fictional tales present different layers or dimensions that allow for a multiplicity of interpretations and meanings, and therein lies their richness. That is why we say that the poetic and the symbolic serve to open up possibilities within the creatures and not to explain them, for to explain would be to reduce all the dimensions of the story to a single one. In his work *The Crisis of Narration* Han (2023) quotes Walter Benjamin: "Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as on recounts it" and, from there, he develops this idea: "A storyteller does not inform or explain. In fact, the art of storytelling demands that information be withheld. Withheld information — that is, a lack of explanation — heightens narrative tension".

THE STORY AS A REPRESENTATION OF OTHERNESS

Many discriminations are born as an expression of the fear of the different, and in our dealing with this fear we can offer, through stories, the experience of that 'otherness' that broadens and widens us from within (see chapter 4). However, it can be seen as positive that the literary text and the inequalities that we want to address in the classroom do not have an obvious or literal relationship. That is, if we are in a white majority context and we are concerned about racial

inequalities, one option might be to look for a text with a black protagonist who talks about how it feels to have a different skin colour than the majority, but any rich and complex text that depicts situations with which we can resonate can be useful to approach what happens to us when we are confronted with what is different. Sometimes, even those situations that do not challenge us in such a direct way are the best doors to places that widen us inside and allow us to open ourselves to the possibility of 'the other':

the invitation is for each and everyone of us to transcend race and gender, to move beyond categories, and into the interior spaces of our psyches to encounter there the ground of our being, the place of mystery, creativity and possibility (hooks 2010).

The space of mystery to which hooks refers appears through the poetic word, whose capacity to evoke possible places transcends the concrete and the literal. Hence we insist on the importance of distinguishing literary stories from 'explanatory' texts of univocal readings, where the reader cannot undertake a journey into the possible, but is limited to receiving the answers contained in the text.

Our ability to transform the world and to transform ourselves –and, therefore, our ability to become aware of inequalities– has a lot to do with our ability to learn from and with the other, and to know our ability to act and not to be passive recipients of messages, but subjects able of elaborating their own discourse and to 'move away', as Josep Maria Esquirol (2024) argues: that is, to cultivate a critical view of what we read.

THE RIGHT TO NOT UNDERSTAND

Finally, we would like to add a note on the fear that a text may be too complex, or rather, the fear that children will not understand it. We believe that it is not necessary to pretend that children always understand everything they read and that we read to them, nor that they understand what they feel or what the texts make them feel. Exposing them to texts that are a little mysterious to them also has virtues and expands people in less obvious but equally necessary ways. If we trust in children and in good literature, and if we adults also get rid ourselves of the fear of not understanding, we only need to act as a bridge; the children and the stories will do the rest.

Jorge Luis Borges said in his classes that, for him, poetry is a happening (and by poetry he does not mean the poem, but literary language in general). He recounts the moments when he listened to his father read aloud: "I do not think I understood the words, but I felt that something was happening to me. It was happening not to my mere intelligence, but my whole being" (Borges 2010, 6). **Let us, then, good stories happen to children**, the stories that were written to no end, those that raise questions and do not give answers, those that are going-somewhere and not getting-somewhere, and from there, let us observe the different resonances that are produced and the emotions that the words awaken, even if sometimes we do not understand them. Let us give ourselves time to contemplate and travel to the different and let us cultivate a critical gaze that helps children to embrace what they are and also what they are not, cannot or do not want to be.

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6

Through the Looking Glass: Fostering Empathy Through Literature

Lorena González Ruiz (Universitat de Vic-Universitat Central de Catalunya)

Ever since the late 1970s, cultural studies have been influenced by the vindications of social movements such as May '68, the Civil Rights movement, and the Feminist movements, among others, which have also fostered increasing debates on the fundamentally social character of reading. Such framework is present within reflections that consider the reader when assessing the social relevance and impact of a literary work, ultimately re-defining reading as a bidirectional and interlocutrice process, as underlined by reception theorists and cultural industry critics (Becker 1990; Jauss et al. 1982). Understanding the social role of literature is also fundamental within the so-called affective turn in literary studies, that is, the theoretical approach concerned with how emotions and feelings are managed and conveyed both within and through literature (Armstrong 2014). Regardless of how complex these debates may be, the discussion behind them is still focused on a rather short yet complex question: what is the relationship between literature and empathy?

According to the historical debate on the subject, most of the theorists argue that literature is a tool to foster empathy, understanding the latter is a vital interpersonal skill for democratic citizenship (Kidd & Castano 2013; Mumper & Gerrig 2017; Nussbaum 2012; Roza & Guimarães 2022). Others, nonetheless, consider that no conclusive results support the influence of literature on the empathic skills of the reader based on the difficulties replicating experiments measuring social cognition of participants after reading (Denham 2024; Roza & Guimarães 2022). These discussions, however, tend to objectify literature as a mere tool, assessing its value from a capitalized perspective, as a means towards an end, rather than valuing literature for the creativity and capacity for introspection it nurtures in the reader. On the other hand, criticisms based on the impossibility of replicating

any research assessing the potential of literature to foster empathy seem oblivious to the fact that literature is socio-culturally and historically contextualized, and so is empathy. Hence, any attempt to replicate such measurements should start by defining what literary works and empathy refer to in a specific given context, to begin with.

Rather than seeking a definitive answer to this debate, this section explores the relationship between literature and empathy **understanding literature as a valuable creative space per se, full of potential for self-reflection**, which might contribute to further understanding how we approach -and thus, create- others and otherness, what we ultimately argue as fostering empathy.

BEYOND THE SINGLE STORY: THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF PLURAL NARRATIVES

In her many works on this topic, literary critic and philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum (2001, 2002, 2008) argues that empathy, as the vicarious capacity to stand in someone else's shoes (Denham 2024; Roza & Guimarães 2022), becomes the process by which we humanize the other.

Within the reader's mind, characters -and by extension, *those others than me*- are further understood through imagination as contextualized in their reality (Nussbaum 2008). In other words, literary transportation, this is, the capacity for both sense-based and affective immersion that leads to evaluative attitudes towards what characters do in literary works (Denham 2024), makes us aware of the inner world of the many others we share society with. Consequently, **it is through the imaginative skills nurtured by literature -this transportation or artistic rapture of sorts- that we as readers get a taste of how others feel, think, and live**. Thus:

A child deprived of stories is deprived, as well, of

certain ways of viewing other people. For the insides of people [...] are not open to view. They must be wondered about. And the conclusion that this set of limbs in front of me has emotions and feelings and thoughts of the sort I attribute to myself will not be reached without the training of the imagination that storytelling promotes (Nussbaum 2008: 148).

Many researchers have considered narrative imagination and literary transportation a process of empathic training according to this standpoint since it is through stories that we learn to configure worlds and realities other than ours where characters and different people live in (Roza & Guimarães, 2022). **Yet, even if stories make the reader empathize with other people, when we only have one story of the other, we stereotype it, and so it becomes our single story of otherness.** As feminist and literary author Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie (2009) reminds us, the problem with stereotypes is not so much that they are not true but, rather, that they should not be the single life story we attribute to otherness. Consequently, literary transportation contributes to making us readers humanize the other in as much as we care to multiply the referents of such otherness our narrative imagination counts with. In this sense, the vital importance of plural narratives -that as readers we should consider involving multicultural literature- lies in the fact that they play a part not only in fostering empathy but also in avoiding ethnocentrism (Cortez 2020).¹

Moreover, plural narratives become an opportunity to broaden the horizon of our imagination concerning ourselves by unveiling desires and longings we never thought about before, providing countless ways of living and understanding life, originating, in short, innumerable portrayals of what we might pursue, feel and do beyond expected stories and written scripts.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE MIRROR: CONSTRUCTING THE SELF THROUGH LITERATURE

Literature broadens the narrative imagination through which we construct others and ourselves by multiplying stories, characters and the inner worlds we attribute to them. Moreover, plural narratives do so nuancedly by complexifying the identification processes we as readers experience throughout literary transportation.

When we reflect on the connection between literature and empathy, we usually think about positive identifications with characters, that is straightforward identifications with what happens in the story, that enables the reader to stand in some of the character's shoes, usually those of the hero. However, identification rarely occurs in such a linear way. Often, readers self-identify with contradictory feelings within storylines such as those embodied by villains and the emotions and affective relationships they represent, from anger and rage to envy and desire for power or being in control. Identifying with apparently negative literary characters and ambivalent emotions, including those responding to universal archetypes present in folktales, however simple such characterizations may seem, helps us to clock these feelings and delve into their management (Bettelheim 2010). At the same time, this process allows us to make sense of our own feelings by understanding the background context and the personal situation of characters, including the evil ones, independently of how predictable the narrative and archetype functions² behind their storylines are (Propp 2009).

Literature explores the ambivalence of identification processes from a symbolic stance, revealing that the stepmother might be both the villain and the character that helps us readers to separate the idealized mother (a security figure) from the real mother (with

1. Ethnocentrism consists of evaluating what we consider otherness -other communities, languages, and cultures- according to the standards and customs of one's own culture (Bizumic 2018).

2. Propp (2009) defines functions as the significant actions or events that move the story forward, such as the villain causing harm or a problem (villainy), and the comeback of the hero involving a personal reward or the restoration of social order (return). Functions are grouped into universal phases of the narrative, such as Preparation, Complication, Struggle, and Resolution.



all her human imperfections) while making sense of complex dynamics at play within real experiences such as motherhood and family structures (Bettelheim 2010). In this regard, and from a symbolic perspective, the stepmother is not so much a disconnection from biological bonding but rather a metaphor for otherness and emotional displacement within the family (Warner 2015). Furthermore, the ambivalence of such identification processes teaches readers to understand the nuances and internal contradictions of real emotions, providing the grounds to accept that something can be happy while evoking melancholy or that someone can be a villain and produce compassion at the same time (Tolkien 2008). In this regard, within the Zoom Out project, we argue that narrative imagination is an experiential process that goes beyond the literalness of the text by enabling plural narratives, ambivalent feelings, and symbolic readings, allowing us to construct ourselves from an increasing complexity as we read.

Overall, it is never as simple as identifying with the good or the evil character, for neither of them is as simple as they might seem, and we embody them all at some point in our lives (Bettelheim, 2010). Rather, it is a matter of considering literary transportation as a mirror from which to reflect on the nuances of how we construct ourselves and others in the first place.

THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD: LITERATURE AS A JOURNEY TO THE OTHER

So far, we have argued the connection between literature and empathy on the grounds of self-construction and emotional comprehension by discussing the relevance of plural narratives to better understand the nuances and complexities of human nature(s). Nevertheless, and returning to our initial question as a means of concluding this discussion: within the project, we argue that **the relationship between literature and empathy is first and foremost that of the journey to the other as a valuable experience *per se*.**

If we take a panoramic look at the history of literature, from creational and epic myths, classical theatre and poetry, to oral literature, including

popular fables and tales, as well as their respective narrative techniques such as refrains, choruses, even epic epithets, and ending morals, we can see that they all aim at interrogating the dynamics of human relationships, thus training our social skills -including empathy- in the first place (Bal 2017). Such interrogation is an aesthetic journey where readers learn through comparative experiences what textual beauty, structural coherence, abstract or symbolic depth, and emotional resonance mean to them in literary terms (Thiselton 2012). What is more, it is through these dimensions of literary transportation that we as readers train our ability to use language effectively and develop a deeper understanding of how linguistic choices (e.g., tone, diction, sentence structure) influence perception and convey emotional responses while (self)attributing agency and context to literary characters and the world itself (Nussbaum 2008). We might ultimately consider these dynamics as training our empathic skills. It is in this holistic sense that within the project we propose literature as an autonomous journey towards otherness, towards empathy, for its linguistic, aesthetic and cognitive independent value.

On the whole, we have explored the relationship between literature and empathy from the vicarious potential of the latter, understanding that literary

transportation can broaden the narratives of our inner world and that of others. As discussed, such a process ultimately contributes to accepting ambivalent identifications, thus complexifying our understanding of emotional management through reading. This is not to say that literature's capacity to evoke empathy always guarantees these internal processes or that all reading produces an empathic reaction in the first place. To get close to this end we should multiply the narratives our imagination counts with, as previously mentioned. However, and as this text has exposed, we argue the intrinsic value of narrative imagination and literary transportation on the fact that they bring together all of these experiences, becoming that yellow brick road that in the end is revealed to us not as the route to the emerald city -that is, towards a specific end-, but rather as the symbol of all those we have met and all that we have learned throughout the journey, which ultimately contributes to humanize those and that which we previously knew nothing about in the first place.

Overall, **as a space that encourages personal introspection and promotes the reader's capacity for self-reflection and engagement with otherness, literature emerges as a powerful tool for fostering empathy.**



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RONJA JUMPS THE RIFT AND SEES THE WORLD FROM THE OTHER SIDE: UNDERSTANDING INEQUALITIES

Ronja, the robber's daughter, feels betrayed and decides to leap across the rift that separates her world from that of the enemy—or rather, from those she had been taught, since childhood, to see as enemies. With this brave act, Ronja breaks away from what she has been taught and makes a decision that challenges the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'.

This character, created by Astrid Lindgren, guides us into this section, which explores how we approach inequality. The following video offers a brief overview of our perspective, using language designed for primary school children.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfUHPy5BsFI>

**SCAN THE QR CODE
TO WATCH THE VIDEO**



7

The intersectional perspective and its applications in children's literature

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The most habitual way of addressing inequalities in the classroom is... to not do it. In the majority of European countries, the subject of inequalities is not systematically included in teacher training. This means that often there is little awareness about the effects of inequality on aspects such as the content being taught, the teaching methodologies, relationships in the classroom and engagement with families.

Not taking into account the effects of inequality prevents us from becoming aware of the stereotypes and biases that we reproduce as teachers (in the selection of stories that we read or in the examples we use in class), of the structural elements that are conditioning aspects of everyday life (inclusion or exclusion in group-class dynamics, trust or mistrust between teachers and families...) or of the learning opportunities that we are missing out on because we are not considering the specific knowledge of those students with less normative backgrounds (for example, the linguistic and cultural richness they can bring to the class, their diverse abilities or the applied mathematical knowledge of a child who has to help their parents in a small family-run business at weekends).

When inequalities are addressed, it is often done from a monofocal perspective, which only is centred on one axis. When we talk about axes of inequality we are referring to the divisions around which socially valued resources are unequally distributed. Thus, people, according to our position on the axes (such as social class, capacities, gender, origin, skin colour and sexual orientation), will have more or less access to certain resources (money, prestige, contacts, information, etc.).

The monofocal perspective, therefore, aims to study and intervene in the effects of one axis of inequality (Coll-Planas & Solà-Morales 2019). In the field of literature this translates as analysing a literary work or the trajectory of an author,

considering only one axis. In relation to the educational field, it transfers to the analysis of the educational reality (in a classroom, the yard or on more macro levels) or to promoting interventions (workshops, pedagogical materials...) that revolve around one axis of inequality.

This perspective has positive aspects: it allows us to focus our attention on the effect of one axis of inequality considering how it affects different areas. In the case of gender, this is known as mainstreaming and it helps to consider gender biases and stereotypes in aspects such as social relations in the classroom, role expectations in Physical Education class or how space in the yard is distributed.

But the monofocal perspective also has disadvantages. Firstly, it leads to only partial interventions since, as the focus is only on one axis, the others are ignored. Thus, we can find that



in one same classroom there is a workshop about sexism one day and a week later there is another workshop on racism, tackling these realities as if they were separable, as if the people one week were only girls or boys, and the next week they were only racialised or white (Coll-Planas, García-Romeral & Garcia-Castillo 2025). While the axes of inequality are distinguishable and it is important to understand their idiosyncrasies, it is also important to understand how they interact with each other, since people are never simply men or women, natives or migrants... we are all of that at once.

A second disadvantage of the monofocal perspective is that it tends to leave the experiences and problems of certain social groups to one side. For example, in a work session, the gender equality officer of an educational centre showed his lack of knowledge about the reality of girls who wore a hijab. For him, this reality was not part of a gender issue and, therefore, the experiences of these girls were not considered within the gender problems, but were attributed to the subject of origin and religious diversity, aspects that are not specifically addressed in the centre. Therefore, in practice the category of boys and girls that he used excluded migrant students and/or students with non-hegemonic beliefs. Similar problems can be found in gender violence prevention materials, which are often focused on the experiences of white, native, cisheterosexual students (Coll-Planas & San Martín 2022).

Thirdly, Ange-Marie Hancock (2007) highlights that the monofocal logic fosters competition between axes of inequality, what she calls "oppression Olympics". Thus, the people or groups responsible for different axes of inequality compete between themselves to achieve more resources (financial and non-financial, such as visibility or recognition) to be able to provide more workshops, more trainings, publish more educational material... What is more, this competition in itself is unequal, since there are axes of inequality that have more resources than others according to aspects such as social context, how it is portrayed in the media, the influence of activism or the political colour of the public administration in charge.

THE INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Around the 1990s in the United States the concept of intersectionality was coined based on contributions from Afro-American activists and academics who highlighted a double criticism: of feminism, for only representing white middle-class women; and of the antiracist movement, for reproducing an androcentric perspective. From this perspective, Kimberlee Greenshaw (1989) criticised "the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" (139) and she argued that "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (140). Therefore, from this perspective it is not about adding up axes, but about understanding the realities that emerge when different axes intersect.

In this vein, Patricia Hill Collins (2002) maintains that **the different forms of oppression are interconnected in a matrix where people occupy changing positions of power. This underlines the interaction and interdependence between axes of inequality, helping to understand that people can be both oppressors and oppressed at the same time.** This approach invites us to understand the complexity of oppressions and to work on dismantling interconnected power structures.

Intersectionality, therefore, provides us with a more complex perspective of inequalities, a perspective that considers the intersections between the different axes of inequalities and that highlights the need to understand them in their context. Therefore, far from proposing grandiose responses or generalisations, it invites us to understand which intersection of axes is relevant in each specific context of intervention.

From this perspective, we are compelled to consider how we are impacted (also in our teaching role) by our structural position in relation to *all* the axes of inequality. And this element is crucial: to remember that all people are located on all the axes, even if sometimes we are privileged enough to not be aware of it. It is a white privilege to not be aware that we are of a certain race (understood as a sociocultural construction of physical features), it is a cisgender privilege to not

consider that all people have a gender identity (not only trans people), and we could continue like this through all the axes of inequality.

At the same time, **intersectionality is a critical perspective that leads us to question how we participate in inequalities**: through our prejudices and projections, but also as people who work in institutions that, structurally, function to reproduce inequalities. Outside of our individual will, therefore, we work in educational institutions that are part of a cog that repeats inequalities of social class, origin and capacity, among others, making the students' educational trajectory very conditioned (but not determined) by these starting conditions. In this vein, as we consider in the next section, one of the first strategies that we can perform to apply the intersectional perspective in teaching work is to recognise how our stance affects us.

RECOGNISING THE BIAS OF THE TEACHING STAFF

In the wake of other transformative discourses such as antiracism or feminism, the intersectional perspective invites us to ask ourselves how the position we have in relation to the axes of inequality affects our life, questioning what we can transfer in our role as teachers.

When we do teacher training, we tend to tackle this subject by considering three questions:

- What elements of your structural position (in relation to the axes of inequality) have implied disadvantages for you?
- What elements of your structural position have afforded you advantages or privileges?
- How does your structural position affect your teaching task?

We launch these questions one by one, allowing time for individual reflection and playing background music to promote introspection. Then, we suggest talking to one's neighbour about what emerged and, finally, we ask if anyone wants to share experiences and reflections with

the larger group; ensuring that we create a brave space (see chapter 13), where the aim is not to point fingers at other people, to embarrass them or to make them feel guilty for recognising that they reproduce stereotypes and biases, but to see how we can take responsibility to bring about change.

This exercise has proved to be very useful to identify biases and stereotypes, to realise what we project onto others based on our own experience, to become aware of the closeness and distances we feel towards students and their families.

Listening to ourselves and recognising that we are consciously or unconsciously participating in the reproduction of inequalities is uncomfortable and painful (for this reason, when we do the activity of the questions we emphasise that each person is free to decide what they want to share). But it is precisely because it moves us, that it is a transformative exercise:

if you've ever felt the sting of a comment or action that was tinged with an unconscious bias, or if you've ever realized with horror that something you've said without malice has been received as racist or sexist or classist, you know how important this work is. It is often the hidden, unintentional forms of bias that are really damaging to marginalized individuals (Ahmed 2018: 104).

Continuing with this logic, Sara K. Ahmed (2018) proposes that her material to work on inequalities with students should first be applied at staff level:

if we want to teach students to be compassionate, complex thinkers, we must first muddle through this work ourselves. Otherwise, we may not be prepared for the outcomes: the fight or flight, the tears, the crawling of skin, the desire to shake the tables (Ahmed 2018: 32).

Work in relation to inequalities, therefore, should not have to become a strategy of passing the buck and highlighting what the students are doing wrong; instead it should include us as teachers and have us reflect on our own intervention in the reproduction of inequalities.

THE PARADOX OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

In the educational field it is essential that we highlight and reflect on the axis of age; an axis that must be understood taking into account its specificities. As warned by Hanna Arendt (1961), some interpret this axis understanding children as an oppressed minority that must be liberated from adult power. In contrast, we agree with the philosopher that this approach does not consider that it would be unfair to treat children as adults and at the same time, that adults need to assume the responsibility of educating children and providing them with the tools to understand and find their place in the world to which we have brought them. Thus, the key would be to reflect on how we exercise adult power from the responsibility of being in charge of minors without abusing of this power.

Age difference is behind the inequality of power between adult teaching staff and young students. If we add the subject of children's literature to this, the axis of age has even more repercussions. As Daniel Nahum (2023: 44) reminds us, *infans* in Latin means "not having the ability to speak", while the word *autor* is linked with *autoritat*. In children's literature there is therefore a contrast between infants without the ability to speak and adult authors who have an authoritative voice.

Here a paradox inherent to children's literature appears: it is literature aimed at children but

written, edited, published, bought and often also read and recommended by adults (an aspect addressed in chapter 2.1); adults who choose the knowledge and values they want to transmit to children:

Every society has created a concept (a mixture of concepts, more precisely) of what it considers 'childhood' to be and, therefore, what its education should be. Based on this imaginary, societies have constructed (producing, adapting and adding new meaning) texts that match the society they want to construct (Nahum 2023: 30).

This asymmetrical relationship is linked to the writing, illustration, production, sale, recommendation and reading but also, as we have seen, to the conversation about interpretation: who has the authority to establish the 'true' meaning of a text? This aspect has been reflected on by authors such as Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault among many others. It is at this point that the idea of conversation emerges again as a key way to work on literature in the classroom, as conversation breaks with the idea of one form of truth over the text, it shifts the hierarchical position, it allows the meaning to be debated and different stances to be recognised (see chapter 12).

RECOGNISING SUBORDINATE KNOWLEDGE

Following the contributions of the sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, Daniel Nahum (2023) states that school does not transmit the culture of society but it reproduces the culture of the hegemonic social class. And it also does that through the books in the library, that it recommends and promotes. Beyond the question of social class, this reflection is also relevant for other axes of inequality such as origin, which can be associated with cultural and religious diversity.

In this vein, Daniel Goldin (in Petit, 2024: 165) states that libraries must be "a place where knowledge is recognised, not only a space where knowledge is safeguarded or made available to the public". This reflection can be extrapolated



to school: from an intersectional perspective, **school cannot be limited to being a space where hegemonic knowledge is stored and shared, but rather, it should be a space where diverse and subordinate knowledge is recognised.**

Fatima Sissani, a French woman of Algerian origin, criticises how French society has ignored the culture of first generation migrants. This has created a “mutilated imaginary” for people who, like her, are part of the second generation: “we emerged from a void, from an origin without genealogy; being deprived of this was the price we paid in exchange for being accepted” (in Petit, 2024: 61). Through her anthropological work, Michèle Petit (2024: 73) has observed that many exiled or migrant families “forget the stories they have been told, or they feel like part of a past that no longer makes sense”; that children are ashamed of their cultural legacy and feel “out of touch” with their family past and their present, a present that is conditioned by a difficult position between different cultural frameworks.

But this reality does not only refer to individual stories or specific families, it is also related to structural aspects, in the words of Petit (2024: 75): “we have not left behind the great contempt towards the cultures of others, in particular towards those who were previously colonised and exiled. We have not left behind our great arrogance”.

The reproduction of hegemonic knowledge and the lack of recognition of subordinate perspectives also generates discomfort and conflict in some families towards a school institution that does not only not value the knowledge that gives meaning to their experience but it imposes alien cultural values on their children. If we reverse this trend, however, we can see the potential of school and of children's literature to recognise cultural contexts and trajectories:

when a child takes ownership of fragments of his parents' culture and that culture is recognised, they will be less afraid of betraying them. They can more easily take ownership of another culture and feel satisfied with this plurality. On the contrary, contempt towards cultures of origin can give rise to a reversion

of the stigma and the demand for a monolithic identity (Petit, 2024: 75).

Understanding schools and libraries as spaces where knowledge is recognised leads to the need to review the literary standard in general, the school's reading itinerary (if there is one), the bibliographical resources available, and the literary mediation activities that take place there. In this vein, Sara K. Ahmed (2018: 104) proposes reviewing our school, class or even personal library asking ourselves: “Whose voices are heard? Who's telling the stories of history? Are there voices in the library -through authors and characters- that reflect voices in the classroom?”. This is an aspect that is dealt with in more detail in the activities titled “Once upon a time” in the Toolbox.

STRATEGIES FOR A PLACE OF ENCOUNTER

We find ourselves in an increasingly polarised setting, where calm listening and conversation with others is increasingly more difficult. The aspects related to equality have gone from being peripheral in the social debate to occupying the epicentre of many controversies. This logic transfers to classrooms, where polarisation is obvious and particularly hinders actions in the sphere of equality. In this context, monofocal interventions are not only insufficient, but, at times, they contribute towards widening the distances between social groups, rekindling dynamics of competition and confrontation.

It is precisely in this context that the intersectional approach towards literature, based on the idea of conversation, appears as a powerful tool. **Because conversing does not only mean speaking; it means recognising the other, opening oneself to a diversity of voices that question us and enrich us, learning to look at the world through different eyes, and finding ourselves in stories that beforehand seemed alien to us.** In short, literature through an intersectional prism can become a place of encounter in an increasingly divided world.

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8

Critical Thinking Through the Lens of Intersectionality: Understanding Diversity

Bruno Ćurko (Udruga Mala filozofija)

The integration of critical thinking and intersectionality provides a powerful analytical framework for understanding and addressing contemporary social issues. While critical thinking encourages individuals to assess situations logically and substantiate their reasoning, intersectionality highlights the complex and overlapping identities that shape experiences and interactions within society. By applying critical thinking through an intersectional lens, we move beyond simplistic explanations of inequality, fostering a deeper appreciation of diversity, inclusion, and equity. This approach holds particular value in educational settings, where analysing literature, history, and social structures through an intersectional lens can assist students in developing a more nuanced understanding of power, privilege, and oppression. Rather than examining issues in isolation, individuals are encouraged to consider how various forms of discrimination –such as racism, sexism, classism, and ableism—interact to shape lived experiences. This approach enables the formulation of more inclusive and equitable solutions to social problems, by acknowledging the diversity of human experiences.

DEFINING CRITICAL THINKING IN A SOCIAL CONTEXT

According to scholars such as Lipman (2003) and Paul & Elder (2002), critical thinking is defined as the ability to analyse, evaluate and synthesise information systematically and rationally. In an educational context, critical thinking is often associated with logical reasoning, problem-solving and questioning assumptions. However, critical thinking is not merely a cognitive skill; it also entails ethical and social responsibility

(Nussbaum, 2012). Martha Nussbaum (2012) emphasises the role of Socratic dialogue in developing critical thinking, arguing that education should cultivate engaged and empathetic citizens who challenge dominant narratives. Similarly, Noam Chomsky (2013) critiques traditional education systems for emphasising rote memorisation rather than fostering independent inquiry, arguing that genuine education should encourage students to interrogate power structures and question ideological biases. Building on these perspectives, Ćurko (2017) highlights the indispensable connection between critical thinking and intellectual autonomy, arguing that without critical thinking, individuals become more susceptible to manipulation and ideological conditioning. I think that education systems that prioritize passive absorption of knowledge over active inquiry contribute to a diminished capacity for independent thought, reinforcing hierarchical structures and limiting democratic engagement. Moreover, critical thinking must be understood as a continuous and self-correcting process rather than a static skill. As Peirce (1877) emphasised, the process of inquiry originates from doubt and dissatisfaction with prevailing beliefs, prompting individuals to seek substantiated conclusions. This concept closely aligns with the general framework of the community of inquiry approach in Philosophy with Children, where dialogue and intellectual challenge drive deeper understanding and intellectual emancipation.

The integration of Socratic questioning, community-based inquiry, and an intersectional perspective has been demonstrated to enhance the effectiveness of critical thinking as a tool for both epistemological rigor and social transformation.

INTERSECTIONALITY: A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

The term “intersectionality” was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to denote the interconnected nature of social identities and the manner in which they contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege (see chapter 7). While early discussions of intersectionality focused primarily on the interaction between gender and race, contemporary applications extend to other dimensions of identity, including class, disability, and sexuality. Intersectionality challenges the notion of universal experiences by highlighting how multiple identity markers interact to shape individuals’ lived realities (Crenshaw 1991). The application of an intersectional lens to critical thinking has been shown to facilitate the identification of implicit biases and structural inequalities embedded within education, media, and political discourse (Crenshaw 1991; Collins & Bilge 2016; Sensoy & DiAngelo 2017). Intersectionality encourages individuals to critically examine how dominant narratives shape public perceptions and reinforce systemic

discrimination. As Crenshaw (1991: 124) observes, “the failure to address the intersection of racism and sexism leaves Black women in a paradoxical space, where neither feminist nor anti-racist movements fully address their needs.”

This approach also reveals how policies that appear neutral on the surface may still perpetuate inequality. As scholars have highlighted,

biases and discrimination on the basis of race, class, disability, and language status have resulted in local, state, and federal mandates that data be disaggregated based on these categories. However, reports rarely take into account the impact on students who are subject to further marginalization when they are assigned more than one of these identity variables (Artiles et al. 2022: 56).

BRIDGING THE TWO APPROACHES: WHY INTERSECTIONALITY NEEDS CRITICAL THINKING

Although an intersectional perspective provides a seminal framework for understanding inequality, it is imperative to recognise that its efficacy is contingent upon the presence of critical thinking. **In the absence of logical reasoning and evidence-based analysis, discourse on intersectionality risks becoming overly subjective or dogmatic.** While intersectionality inherently stems from a political and ideological framework, its analytical strength lies in its ability to uncover structural inequalities through critical inquiry. Critical thinking is instrumental in ensuring that intersectional analyses remain rigorous, well-supported, and open to revision, thereby circumventing the pitfalls of essentialism or reductionism (Artiles et al., 2022: 97). Conversely, critical thinking benefits from intersectionality by expanding its scope beyond abstract reasoning to include social justice and lived experiences. A purely rationalist approach to critical thinking, devoid of intersectional considerations, may overlook systemic factors that shape individual opportunities and constraints:

When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of



social division, but by many axes that work together and influence each other (Collins and Bilge 2016: 2).

This perspective is particularly relevant in education, where a lack of intersectional awareness can reinforce existing disparities.

Educational policies often fail to account for the compounded effects of race, gender, class, and disability, leading to further marginalization rather than inclusion (Artiles et al. 2022: 56).

The integration of critical thinking with intersectionality is a pedagogical approach that enables educators and policymakers to develop more inclusive frameworks that address structural inequalities rather than perpetuating them.

The relationship between critical thinking and intersectionality is not one of competition, but of mutual reinforcement. Critical thinking provides the tools for logical analysis, while intersectionality ensures that analysis remains attuned to real-world complexities. The absence of this integration, as articulated by Artiles et al. (2022: 108), engenders either an excess of abstract and disconnected discourse or an ideological rigidity that renders it impervious to scrutiny (Artiles et al. 2022: 108).

APPLICATIONS IN EDUCATION: RETHINKING CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

The integration of critical thinking and intersectionality has been demonstrated to have transformative implications for education. In educational settings, these principles can be implemented in various ways, including:

Literature and Critical Reading

The application of critical thinking through an intersectional lens in the analysis of a literary work necessitates the interrogation of how characters' experiences are shaped by factors such as race, gender, class, and other identities. Adopting this approach enables students to move beyond superficial interpretations, prompting them to examine which voices are centred or marginalised and how dominant societal structures influence the narrative and its themes.

To illustrate this point, a conventional analysis of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series might

concentrate on themes of heroism, friendship, and good versus evil. However, an intersectional analysis would examine how gender, class and social privilege interact within the story. For instance, an intersectional analysis could explore how Hermione Granger's Muggle-born status subjects her to discrimination (paralleling real-world racial and class-based prejudices), how house-elves represent issues of servitude and labour exploitation, or how characters from less privileged backgrounds, such as Rubeus Hagrid, are treated within the wizarding community.

A traditional analysis of Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* (1945) might focus on the story's humour, adventure, and themes of childhood independence. An intersectional analysis, however, would examine how Pippi, as a wealthy, parentless girl with exceptional physical strength, challenges traditional gender roles and class expectations. It could explore how her defiance of authority and social norms positions her as an outsider, raising questions about privilege and marginalization. Furthermore, it could interrogate the colonial stereotypes present in the book, particularly in its depiction of non-European cultures, prompting discussions about how children's literature reflects social biases.

This approach encourages students to critically assess implicit biases in literature and consider how stories reflect or challenge social norms. By interrogating the dominant and silenced voices in literature, and by exploring the influence of identity on character experiences, students can develop a more profound understanding of diversity and power structures in storytelling.

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privilege shape the protagonist's experience. Cinderella's status as an orphaned, working-class girl renders her vulnerable to exploitation, while the stepmother and stepsisters represent societal gatekeepers who reinforce class and gender hierarchies. Additionally, the role of the Prince as the ultimate saviour highlights the gendered expectation that a woman's social mobility depends on marriage rather than personal agency.

This analysis encourages students to critically examine how classic narratives reflect and perpetuate social structures, helping them understand the historical roots of power dynamics.

By exploring whose perspectives are included or excluded, students develop a more complex and critical understanding of both history and storytelling.

Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship

In an era of misinformation, media bias, and digital manipulation, critical thinking is essential for evaluating news sources, political rhetoric, and online content. Intersectionality adds another layer to media literacy by helping uncover hidden biases in media representations, prompting critical questions, such as:

- Whose stories are being told, and whose are omitted?
- How do media portrayals reinforce or challenge stereotypes?
- What power dynamics shape the production and dissemination of information?

For example, in children's media, animated films and cartoons have historically reinforced gender and racial stereotypes. Consider the early Disney princess films, where female protagonists were often passive and dependent on male rescuers, or the limited representation of diverse ethnic backgrounds. A traditional media literacy approach might focus on the accuracy of information and visual storytelling, while an intersectional approach would explore how race, gender, and class influence which characters have agency and whose voices dominate the narrative. A concrete example is Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). A traditional analysis may celebrate it as the first Disney movie with a Black princess. An intersectional analysis might question why Tiana spends most of the movie as a frog rather than being represented as a human Black woman, or how class struggle is central to her story, reinforcing certain narratives about labour and success.

By integrating critical thinking and intersectionality in the analysis of children's literature and media, students develop stronger

media literacy skills, allowing them to navigate complex socio-political discourses with greater discernment. While intersectionality provides a framework for understanding overlapping forms of oppression, critical thinking functions as an independent methodological tool that enables students to assess claims, identify biases, and question assumptions within these narratives. Without critical thinking, discussions on intersectionality risk becoming uncritical affirmations of ideological positions rather than rigorous analyses of systemic inequalities.

CHALLENGES AND CONTROVERSIES: ADDRESSING RESISTANCE TO INTERSECTIONAL CRITICAL THINKING

Despite its intellectual and ethical merits, the integration of critical thinking and intersectionality in education is not without controversy. Critics argue that intersectionality promotes a politicized worldview that divides rather than unites. For example, conservative commentator Ben Shapiro described intersectionality as "a form of identity politics in which the value of your opinion depends on how many victim groups you belong to. At the bottom of the totem pole is the person everybody loves to hate: the straight white male" (in Coaston 2019). Moreover, several Marxist scholars posit that intersectionality accentuates identity over class struggle, with the potential to divert attention from more general economic issues. They argue that this focus can lead to fragmented movements, hindering unified efforts for systemic change. At the same time, some proponents of intersectionality, such as Jennifer Nash (2019) and Patricia Hill Collins (2016), have also critiqued certain uses of the framework, particularly its institutionalization and the risk of reducing it to a fixed identity-based paradigm rather than a dynamic analytical tool. These critiques underscore concerns that, while intersectionality aims to address complex social inequalities, it may inadvertently foster division by emphasizing differences over commonalities.

However, some feminist scholars argue that the notion of critical thinking as a neutral tool is itself problematic, as it does not fully account for the

positionality of those engaging in critique or the assumptions underlying the perceived need for balancing intersectionality (e.g., Ahmed, 2017; Nash, 2019).

There is a debate within critical thinking about whether critical thinking should engage explicitly with social justice issues or remain value-neutral. There has been pushback from traditional institutions – some educational policies and curricula resist intersectional perspectives, favouring canonical knowledge over diverse viewpoints. In addressing these concerns, educators must acknowledge that all knowledge production is situated within ideological and political contexts. Rather than positioning intersectional critical thinking as opposed to ideology, it can be framed as an approach that critically interrogates existing power structures while maintaining intellectual rigor (Ahmed 2017; Nash 2019).

The synergy between critical thinking and intersectionality provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the complexities of society. The integration of these approaches within educational curriculums is pivotal in nurturing citizens who are not only informed

and empathetic but also possess the capacity for analytical thinking. This, in turn, enables them to engage effectively with the world's most pressing social challenges. **Education should not be confined to the mere transmission of information; rather, it should empower students to deconstruct power structures, challenge biases, and advocate for equity.** When employed effectively, critical thinking through an intersectional lens ensures that solutions to social issues are inclusive, ethical, and reflective of the diversity of human experiences.



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9

Intersectional Bodies. How to Draw “Normal Bodies” with All Their Colours, Fat, Disabilities and Wrinkles

Elena Fierli, Giulia Franchi, Giovanna Lancia & Sara Marini (Scosse)

White, thin, able-bodied figures, neatly dressed, set against backgrounds resembling affluent residential neighborhoods, safe homes, well-maintained schools, and lush green lawns: these are the dominant images that most picturebooks continue to reinforce.

If we focus on bodies, we can analyse how they are presented across literature, especially in picturebooks, which we consider to be important and powerful tools in the transmission of models and values and in the construction of imaginaries, in particular when literature is aimed at children and young adults. In real life, there are bodies that succumb, that give up, bodies that have no voice, there are bodies that take control of their own lives and move towards safety, and privileged bodies that rarely struggle with hardship or failure. Many types of bodies exist, representing various ethnicities and needs, but despite this, it remains difficult to find representations of disabled, racialized, elderly bodies or in conditions of poverty. Anything that deviates from the Western canon gaze is often rendered like exotic, exceptional, or even whose traits, physical or character, are so exaggerated as to seem caricatures (Fierli 2024a; Fierli & Marini 2021, 2024; Chabrol Gagne 2011). Even today, in mainstream narratives, which are nothing more than an exercise of power by dominant groups, all those bodies that exist in everyday spaces without having a voice are made invisible. These are bodies that fall outside normative frameworks because they are disabled, trans*, have a skin color different from “pink,” or are too old to attract attention.

In picturebooks about bodies, we often tend to forget, that these bodies that are represented in these stories think and feel, that they build relationships (affectionate, romantic, sexual, violent, toxic). It is also often overlooked that

these relationships contribute to creating patterns and models that society partly nurtures, partly approves and re-proposes, and which are the basis for all those rules that define, judge, reward and sanction “good” or “bad.”

Talking about bodies means talking about emotions, relationships, affection, sexuality, empowerment, violence, control, and power.

And to address these topics it becomes essential to provide children with tools to understand our world, decipher what happens around them, and help them grow with a critical and aware perspective of the context they live in, as well as with curiosity for what they do not yet know (Van der Linden 2006; Coats 2018).

But it is also essential to talk about these topics, if we want to give children —along with all the differences they carry— the opportunity to self-



determination, to feel like true inhabitants of a context, legitimized to exist and to fully experience life. First of all, because the body is the first thing we present to an external gaze; then, because feeling good within our own body (accepting it as it is, without trying to conform it to an ideal and unattainable model), knowing how to listen to its signals, desires, and hesitations, becomes the best way to build healthy and equal relationships that generate well-being and pleasure, making us feel at ease in the world we live in.

Knowing all the parts of our body and being able to name them means also giving a name to our reactions and the emotions we experience. It means being able to process and express our boundaries, to say 'no' when need to. Understanding that our body grows and is constantly transforming allows us to navigate



these changes consciously—not just during puberty, but also before and after.

Being aware that our sexuality is not just about physical acts, but above all about desire, pleasure, and consent, empowers us to decide how we want to experience it. Within sexual or romantic relationships, this awareness provides us with the tools to engage in them freely and without pressure, without seeing reproduction (or ways to avoid it!) as the sole purpose. Instead, it encourages us to pay attention to our desires and needs, as well as those of others (Vivancos Sánchez 2023; Fierli 2024b).

Knowing our body not only from a physiological perspective also allows us to understand, express, and narrate our identity. It enables us to question the dominant cisheteronormativity and challenge the binary reading and categorization—not only of gender but of the entire reality that surrounds us (Miller 2022).

Being aware of who we are and who we want to become—without succumbing to social pressures or rigid, definitive norms—teaches us to make space for doubt, questioning, and breaking the normative cages that expect us to fully align with the expectations imposed by family, school, and society at large.

Having a peaceful relationship with our body also **helps us listen to the bodies of others, ensuring we do not cross boundaries that could harm them. It supports the rejection and deconstruction of a culture of violence while fostering a culture of consent and respect for the bodies and people around us** (Richard 2019). It also teaches us to imagine ourselves in the future—who we want to be, how, and where—without the need to conform to a single model or way of thinking.

Instead, we often find ourselves reading and browsing books where the adult characters who almost always occupy caregiving roles are white, healthy, middle-class, and almost exclusively heterosexual. In these books, children are predominantly white, while racialized characters (who are usually only depicted as being of African descent) appear primarily in stories about inclusion

and anti-racism. They are also typically able-bodied and the children of heterosexual parents.

We encounter picture books and literature where sexuality is only mentioned to reinforce the idea that reproduction is the only desirable, respectable, and natural destiny for everyone—especially for women (Fierli 2024b). These narratives continue to portray male sexuality as dynamic, active, and full of expectations, while feminine sexuality -when named- is depicted as passive, waiting, and primarily linked to menstruation and pain (Rinaldi 2016).

At the same time, in a lot of stories and picturebooks, bodies are expected to be highly performative in both productive and reproductive way, in every action. They must be fit, healthy, beautiful, young, seductive, and successful from both a social and economic perspective. There is a strict division of roles—productive and reproductive—clearly defined by gender, male and female bodies are presented like segregated when talk about growing bodies, groups, emotions, yet unified when reinforcing a cisheteronormative family model.

Images and stories have the power to transmit and perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices. (Turin 2003), they shape judgments, standardize tastes toward specific cultural and social expressions, and dictate what is deemed acceptable. While social stereotypes may help bring order to the chaos of everyday life by allowing us to name and categorize things, they also can reinforce and entrench a hegemonic and patriarchal culture and this leaves little room for questioning alternative perspectives, desires and needs that fall outside the predefined categories.

There are many books that we can take as examples of this situation: very good, quality books that, however, do not make any contribution to the deconstruction of stereotypes because they do not activate any kind of alertness to the representations they put forward.

If we adopt an intersectional approach, one

that considers multiple factors (such as ethnicity, age, cultural and socioeconomic background, ability, and body shape) to paint a more accurate picture of the complexity of our bodies and how we inhabit space, it becomes even harder to find narratives that truly reflect and respond to this complexity. Applying an intersectional perspective to the analysis of representations and narratives never means adopting a “cumulative” approach—it is not about making a list of how many forms of discrimination one body accumulates compared to another. Instead, it highlights how the same body can find itself in a position of vulnerability in one context and in a position of power and privilege in another (hooks 2020; Demozzi & Ghigi 2024).

A person in a wheelchair, for example, may be in a state of total vulnerability if the space is inaccessible, yet, at the same time, they may hold a position of privilege if they are white, middle-class, and crossing a border. This is why, when discussing bodies, it is essential to also address issues of control, power, and privilege (Chabrol Gagne 2011; Bernardi 2014).

And then there are the small revolutions. There are books that talk about bodies simply because bodies (of all kinds, all colors, and with any level of social or economic success) exist. These stories include them just as they are, without needing to highlight their ethnicity, (dis)ability, or socio-economic and cultural background¹. There is no need to focus exclusively on their vulnerabilities or struggles; within these stories, they have a voice, they take up the space they need, and they tell their own stories.

There are few such books, ones that do not take a didactic approach to bodies, gender, disability, class, or bullying. But the ones that do exist are powerful. These are the books where a story is told, and the protagonists are all different, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. Some of these stories are difficult, others are funny, romantic, or adventurous.

1. We explore the topic of bodies with different abilities and the accessibility of picture books in the contribution written together with Il Pungiglione in this same guide.

These are books like *Julie: the girl with a boy's shadow* (*Histoire de Julie qui avait une ombre de garçon*) by Anne Bozellec and Christian Bruel, written and illustrated in France in 1975 and later republished with great success across Europe. It tells the story of a person—her body and identity—fighting to be recognized first and foremost by her own parents, and who must lose herself in order to find herself again.

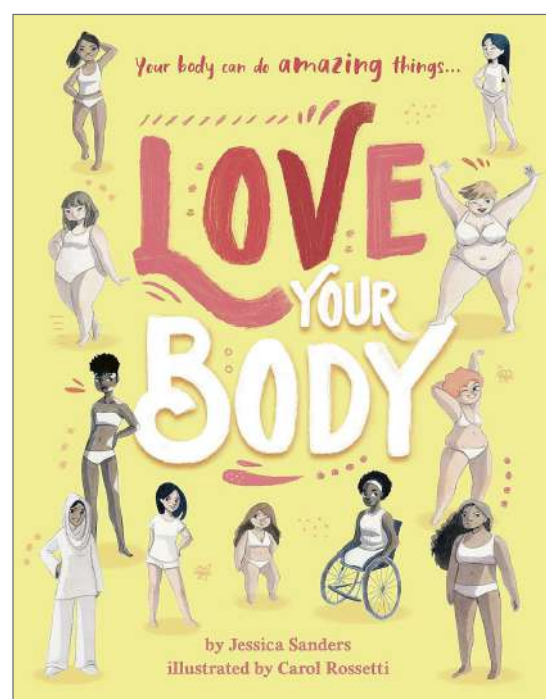
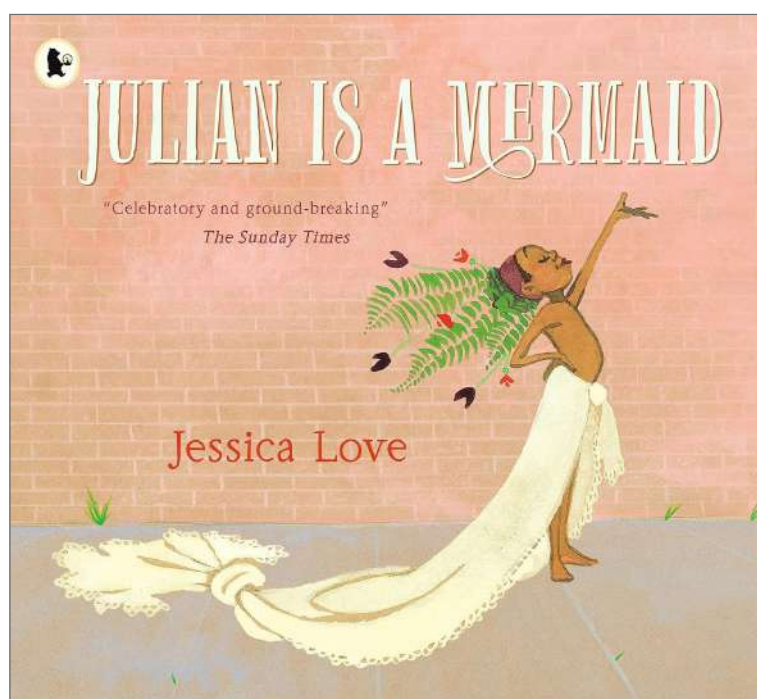
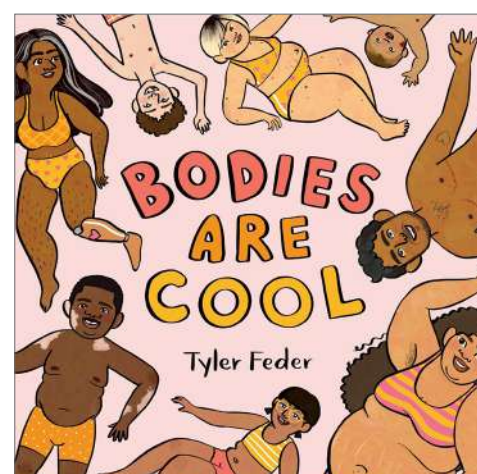
It's the story of the children in *Les petits peintres nus* (The Smaller Naked Painters) by Seung-Yeoun Moon and Suzy Lee, who unleash their imagination in a whirlwind of colors, painting on their own bodies and their mother's in a tender and playful adventure.

It's the journey of Julián in *Julián Is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love, in which a grandmother and her grandchild set off together, happy and in harmony, to the Mermaid Parade in Coney Island.

It's the stories of the diverse individuals in *Bodies Are Cool* by Tyler Feder

or *Love Your Body* by Jessica Sanders and Carol Rossetti.

These are books that explore bodies from many different perspectives, telling a wide range of stories—because that is the only way to expand our horizons and create free, open, and conscious imaginaries.



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10

Intersectional Approach to Picturebooks

Elena Fierli, Giulia Franchi, Giovanna Lancia & Sara Marini (Scosse)

A picture book is a powerful and direct cultural device that contributes to the construction of imaginaries through its images, the way it tells the story, the language it uses, the dialogue it creates between illustrations and words, and the wonder and questions it evokes (Van der Linden 2006; Nikolajeva and Scott 2001; Nodelman 2018).

When reading, flipping through, or narrating a picture book, one learns to look beyond the actual images, to read between the lines, and to narrate the present while loading it with the past and future. Thus, symbolic codes, fantasies, knowledge, beliefs, and different ways of interpreting reality are developed.

The detonating force of a picture book lies in the number of questions it provokes, the critical reflections it encourages, and the acquisition of new contentions to support one's thoughts. It has the power to transmit models and values, but also prejudices and stereotypes.

On one hand, authors and illustrators propose their vision of the world. Through their perspective and storytelling, they center their own points of view, models, and references. On the other hand, since narration is never neutral, authors' and illustrators' work can (even unconsciously) mediate (either transmit or deconstruct) biases, stereotypes, conservative and limiting models, norms, and behaviors that society expects us to follow—thoughts it wants to impose on us (what is right and what is not, what we should like and dislike, what it means to be a man or a woman, what it means to be successful or not).

Therefore, the same power to generate questions and critical thinking can also (often) reinforce and legitimize stereotypes, prejudices, and, consequently, discrimination (Turin 2003; Coats 2018). Some even speak of the risk of colonizing children's minds (Nodelman 2008; Hamelin 2012). Picturebooks (and children's and young adult literature in general)

maintain this "ambiguity" or semantic duality because they are created by adults for young readers—an audience toward which a specific message and narrative are directed, deemed "suitable for them," yet where the criteria of "suitability" are defined by adults themselves (see chapter 2). This ambiguity or complexity does not diminish the power of picturebooks or their transformative ability to shape imaginaries. However, it is essential to develop a critical eye so that this power fosters the creation of free, non-normative, non-judgmental, and non-conformist imaginaries.

What distinguishes picturebooks from general literature is undoubtedly the presence of images. This is not just in regards to the interplay between images and words, which can shift meaning in different ways or even eliminate the need for words altogether in "silent books" without weakening the narrative. It is primarily about the new meaning that images take on, creating a complex narrative layer that continuously offers original possibilities for reading and interpretation (Fierli et al. 2015 and 2020). However, picturebooks are often undervalued due to a bias that considers them less "important" (Andruetto 2014) because they are seen as "easier," reflecting a literary vision that focuses solely on childhood education rather than fostering reading practices that bring pleasure, comfort, and well-being (see chapter 5).

In selecting picture books that challenge stereotypes, it is crucial to seek quality in the images, writing, editorial and graphic design (paper, endpapers, cover) and establish thoughtful selection criteria. These criteria should not be rigid (as the very nature of picture books resists rigidity) but well-constructed, open to questioning, and broad enough to address diverse needs.

These needs include the "necessity" for beautiful illustrations (acknowledging the complexity and contradictions of this term) that

should be non-conformist and do not impose a single perspective or reinforce stereotypes or “conformist canons”; the “necessity” for a rich storytelling, where both the original language and any translations are well-crafted and not oversimplified just because the audience is young. Moreover, the aim should be to move beyond hegemonic and hierarchical discourse, particularly the male gaze that dominates much of cultural production (Berger, 1972; Chabrol Gagne, 2011). It is vital to reject hegemonic and hierarchical narratives, deconstruct the gender, racial, class, and ableist stereotypes to overcome a vision that flattens diversity, fostering conformity in perspectives, behaviors, and thoughts. We must question the binary, capitalist, and colonialist categorization of reality.

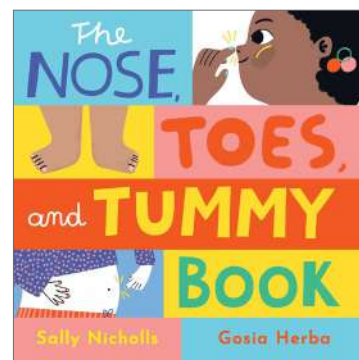
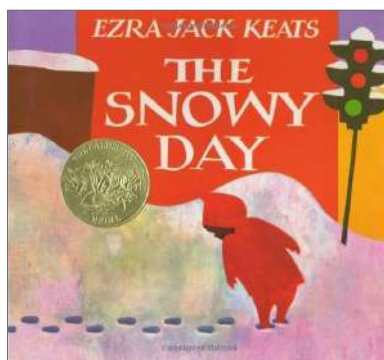
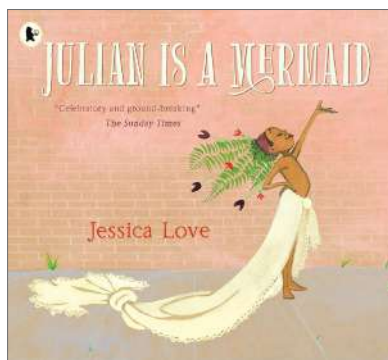
It is all these elements that provide us with the tools to analyze (as well as read and select) picture books from an intersectional perspective—one that brings together multiple factors (which, of course, will not always carry the same weight), considers the discursive constraints produced not only by sexism but also by other systems

of discrimination, contributes to the process of decolonizing the imagination, and has only in recent years characterized the academic debate in Italy and Europe (Romeo & Fabbri 2025).

Analyzing picture books through an intersectional perspective thus allows us to adopt a broader viewpoint, to notice previously overlooked details, and to curate more diverse and extensive bibliographies, always with the goal of deconstructing stereotypes (Handler Spitz 2000). This is in theory. In practice, we realize that the books that meet even some of these criteria are few, do not always align with the definition of a “quality picture book,” and are often designed to “solve” a problem. In contrast to a canon that favors white, able-bodied, middle-class individuals in heterosexual relationships, this approach, rather than “normalizing” the presence of (for example) bodies of all types and skin colors, tends to trivialize the topic and exoticize diversity in contrast to the dominant narrative, which primarily represents white, able-bodied, middle-class individuals, preferably in heterosexual relationships.

Despite all these critical issues, **in recent years we have witnessed a significant shift in children's and young adult publishing, and we can find a growing number of books that place at the centre bodies with different abilities, from various social classes and socioeconomic backgrounds, with diverse skin colours and facial features, and that narrate open and multiple stories. Tales that put racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and so on at the centre of the narrative (and reflection) without turning into didactic stories but maintaining the pleasure of reading and care for illustrations and text** (Miller 2022; Bruel 2023; Naidoo 2012).





WHICH PICTUREBOOKS? TITLES THAT TAKE AN INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

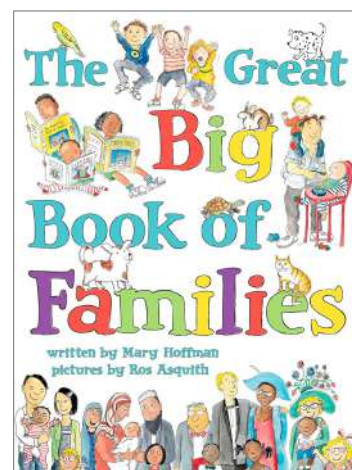
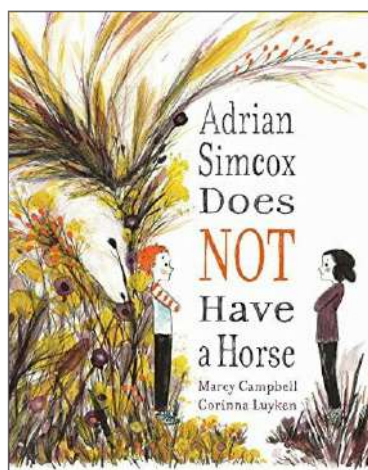
We examine some books (translated into many European languages) we consider emblematic of this vision—one that does not spotlight issues by victimizing individuals or, as we have said, exoticizing human differences. Instead, these books narrate free and inclusive stories, featuring protagonists of different ethnicities, cultures, and social classes, with bodies that differ from one another, who think and move through the world with equal dignity and in diverse ways, according to their own possibilities, attitudes, and dreams.

Let us begin with *Julián is a mermaid*, by Jessica Love, already mentioned in the previous chapter, where Julián's dream of being a mermaid overcomes all barriers (first and foremost, the intergenerational dynamic of the relationship with his grandmother) immersing readers into the vibrant colours of the Coney Island Mermaid Parade. Gender identity and racialization are represented, yet never imposed as overt

themes. The reaction of Julián's grandmother is the powerful engine of this story: just when we expect a conventional reaction, Love transforms actions and reactions into surprise, gives life to a bewilderment that gives shape and strength to the story and the message under the text.

The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats (first published in 1962 and recently reissued) sees a Black child, Peter (the first to be featured in a successful picturebook), who quietly enters the world of illustrated literature, without having to wear - in order to star in the story - either straw skirts or bones in his hair. He has a red cape, everything is covered in snow outside, and, with the same silent delicacy of snow, Peter explores his urban world. Never before has a Black child, alone in the snow, had such disruptive transformative power.

Other picture books, such as *Shhh* by Fred Paronuzzi, illustrated by Mariana Ruiz Johnson, *The Nose, Toes, and Tummy Book* by Sally Nicholls and Gosia Herba, *Adrian's Horse* by Marcy Campbell, or *The Great Big Book of Families* by



Mary Hoffman and Ros Asquith, depict families composed of individuals from different ethnic backgrounds, with diverse sexual orientations, living in various socioeconomic contexts, sharing everyday routines filled with togetherness, cooperation, care, and work.

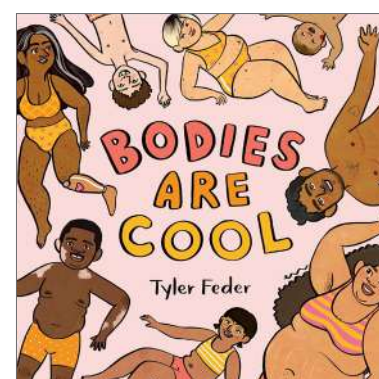
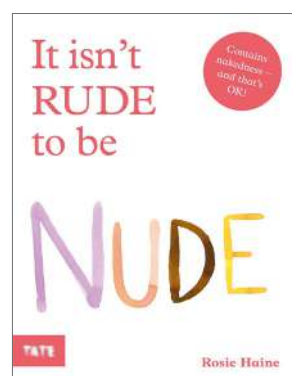
Without putting too much weight on skin color or the protagonists' emotional and romantic choices—nor feeling the need to explain that discomfort in encountering people that are different from ourselves should (or could?) by now be a thing of the past—these books simply offer a snapshot of the real world as it is: a world made up of people who love, move, work, and think within diverse bodies—bodies that are more or less fat, thin, young, or old—coming from different ethnicities and cultures, performing various jobs that place them in different social classes, and living in homes of all kinds.

Speaking of diverse bodies, in the past few years (more or less, we can say that 2010 is a year that marks a major turning point in representations), we have seen picture books that have revolutionized the way bodies, skin, disability, and age are represented¹. Consider, for example, *Bodies are Cool* by Tyler Feder or *It Isn't Rude to be Nude* by Rosie Haine. Books in which skin is no longer simply brown or pink but comes in a range of shades, with spots, moles, freckles, taut and toned or loose

and wrinkled, showing stretch marks or defined, strong muscles. These books do not shy away from illustrating bodies with mechanical prosthetics, fat bodies, or aging bodies, embracing a more authentic and inclusive representation.

And so, if the goal is truly to represent—albeit through fictional stories—the world we see around us every day, why is it still so difficult to find picture books that feature racialized people, non-heterosexual individuals, non-binary and trans* identities, the poor, the fat, and the disabled, whether as main characters or otherwise?

If the goal is that books represent what we see daily around us, we can ask ourselves why is it still so hard to find books that feature (as protagonists or otherwise) racialized people, non-heterosexual individuals, non-binary or trans* people, the poor, the fat, or the disabled?



1. We also explore the topic of bodies in chapter 9.

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11

Looking at the Books Around Us

María Alonso Gómez (Artijoc)

The garden, like the book, is a space for refuge and escape, a place of creativity where we flee from a demanding time to reconnect with the intimacy of dreams and the imaginary.

Aline Hébert-Matray.

This conversation between children's literature and intersectionality has taken place, quite naturally, among books. For the various organizations and schools involved in the project, books have helped us to converse, and conversations have led us to discover new books. The collection of works we present below is not a list of recommendations or a proposal with thematic coherence, nor is it organized by axes of inequality, countries, or age ranges. Rather, it is a dialogue sustained by many voices, in many languages, from diverse experiences, territories, and sensibilities.

We propose **a walk through a garden of books that may serve as an example for thinking about classroom libraries or compiling reading lists**, while opening up the possibility of incorporating the voices of classroom teachers, special education teachers, music and physical education specialists, speech therapists, counselors, teachers from welcome classrooms, friends, parents, grandparents, neighbors, and more. The diversity of perspectives during selection can offer valuable insights to enrich the process. The idea is that each small library can be a garden of diverse gazes, allowing every child to take different paths where they can find reflections and mirrors, questions, and places from which to view the world.

In our case, the titles we cite here are works we have chosen because they align with one or more of the criteria set out in other chapters, because they illustrate ideas we encourage exploring in the classroom, because they have the potential to spark debate or awaken critical thinking, or simply because they are brave reads. Just like Ollivander's wands choose their wizards in *Harry*



Potter, sometimes books choose people, not the other way around. So here you will also find books that found or chose us—books that crossed our path and gifted us moments we believe are worth sharing. **These books form a living, shared, and disobedient garden, like the one described by Pippi Longstocking in the prologue of this Handbook, where wild ideas, laughter, and challenges grow; where the unexpected and the critical, the tender and the unsettling, all have a place.**

Our walk begins with *Rosa's Bus* (Silei 2012), illustrated by Maurizio Quarello, an album that revisits the story of Rosa Parks as a gesture of disobedience and dignity. It challenges us not only for its anti-racist content, but also because it highlights how gender, class, age, and race intersect in acts of resistance. Readings like this allow us to talk about civil rights and open conversations on courage, the everyday nature of struggles, and the importance of remembering in order to transform reality.

We continue with a playful and open approach to the construction of the Other: *The Top and the Bottom* by Paloma Valdivia (2023). This is a book that plays with the geometry of space to question the hierarchies embedded in our thinking. With an apparently simple structure, it invites us to make a turn—both literal and symbolic—to see the world from different perspectives and understand that all identity is relative and constructed.

Through the metaphor of those who live above and those below, the book opens an ideal space for an intersectional reading: who occupies the center? Who remains on the margins? Who decides what is 'normal' or 'desirable'? The visual proposal, with the book symmetrically divided and illustrations that can be read from either direction, compels us to shift our body and our point of view. It is a perfect metaphor for thinking about inequalities through the body, through movement, through the need to shift perspectives to understand realities that are not our own.

Another book that resists closed answers and instead opens a path built through reading, viewing, and dialogue is *Histoire de Julie qui avait une ombre de garçon* by Christian Bruel and Anne

Galland (2009). With a distinctive aesthetic—lyrical narration and illustrations that break through text and graphic silences—this book invites children to think about gender, social mandates, and the freedom to be.

Julia's shadow, which from the beginning takes the shape of a boy, becomes a complex, living metaphor that allows us to talk about what we feel, even if it cannot be seen. What happens when our ways of being, moving, speaking, or playing don't fit with what is expected? What happens when the gaze of others becomes a norm, a judgment, a pressure?

This book explores the interstices and subtly addresses less visible forms of oppression that inhabit the everyday: adultcentrism, binaries, and the difficulty of sustaining difference. The book's aesthetics also contribute to this perspective, with shifting typefaces and illustrations that break out of conventional frames.

Our stroll leads us into the Balkans with *Duga* by Dinko Šimunović (1914) and *Tena* by Josip Kozarac (1894)—two novels written more than a century ago, yet full of contemporary resonance. Both texts have long been required reading in Croatian schools. *Duga* ("the rainbow") tells the story of a girl and the harshness of her social environment. In Croatian folk belief, passing beneath a rainbow can turn a girl into a boy or vice versa. This ancestral belief symbolically traverses *Duga*, becoming the poetic heart of a story with many layers of meaning. The protagonist's deepest desire is to pass under the rainbow, not only for the magic, but because it represents the possibility of escaping her assigned place, of transforming, of becoming someone else to get the rights she doesn't have as a woman, the rights she's been denied.

Tena, on the other hand, focuses on a young woman who challenges traditional gender expectations and faces collective judgment and marginalization. Her journey is not a celebration of transformation, but a critical exploration of its cost when based on objectification, submission, or the sacrifice of autonomy.

Both stories challenge us not only through their content but through the way and place from

which they are told. In *Duga*, the girl's character is often viewed through stereotypes that today feel problematic, since she has no rights and must strictly follow the rules, worry about her physical appearance and manners, always under the magnifying glass of a society that judges women from an early age. All together can serve as a starting point for discussions on racialization, otherness, and exclusion. How is otherness constructed? How is a childhood situated on the cultural, linguistic, and economic margins represented?

In *Tena*, the conflict centers on gender, desire, and social sanction. Tena does not fit the mold of a "good woman," and her tragic fate can be read as punishment or warning. But it can also be interpreted as a denunciation of patriarchal moral

codes, collective hypocrisy, and the price paid by those who dare to disobey.

These are just a couple of examples of readings that allow us to bring canonical texts into conversation with the present, to ask what questions they raise for us and what they teach us about the historical construction of norms around gender, class, or ethnicity.

Picturebooks are one of the great sources of inspiration in this project because we see them as complex interpretive devices in which text and image dialogue, contradict, and amplify one another (see chapter 10). Some allow us to

see often-invisible social realities, helping us open cracks and tensions in order to build classroom conversations and create poetic and symbolic spaces that go beyond words. In *The Invisible* (Percival 2020), Isabel and her family lose their home when they can no longer pay rent. In their new grey, peripheral neighborhood, the young protagonist begins to disappear. The story shows how poverty and exclusion can erase people. *Barro de Medellín* (Gómez Cerdá 2008) once again illustrates how a library can transform the outlook of two boys living in a marginal neighborhood. *El Gallinero* (Floriano & Delicado 2022) gives voice to silenced childhoods and transports us to Madrid's Cañada Real, the largest informal settlement in Europe, where struggle and tenderness coexist on the page.

Los cuentos de Lesbos (Burgas 2023) collects stories invented by children from a refugee camp, turning fiction into symbolic refuge. *The Island* (Greder 2015) strikes us with uncomfortable questions about rejection, while *Duck's Backyard* (Hub 2024) reflects on fear of the other and exclusion. *Refugiados* (Brenman 2023) reviews the great migrations in history, from ancient Egypt to the present day, through the eyes of childhood. *Colas de sueños* (Sineiro 2022) is the first-person account of a child locked in a refugee camp, linking waiting to hope in the midst of uprootedness. *Town is by the Sea* (Schwartz 2019) contrasts the beauty of the landscape with the harshness of mining labor.



Our journey also includes powerful symbolic narratives like *The Paul Street Boys* (Molnár 1906), a classic set in early 20th-century Budapest that narrates the struggle between two groups of children over control of a vacant lot, in the midst of which the bravery and devotion of the one kid, Nemeček, stands out. The disputed terrain, seemingly worthless, symbolizes territory, identity, and belonging—echoing the spaces where children build their collective imaginary and sense of community. More than a century later, we land in *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros 2020), a story set in a Latino neighborhood of Chicago, where writing becomes a tool of resistance. Then we meet Castle Cranshaw, the protagonist of *Ghost* (Reynolds 2016), a runner racing beyond the track, navigating racism and resilience, laying bare the everyday violence many children face.

Some stories in our walk don't speak of the outside world but reveal our own. Gender identity, family diversity, and body diversity appear throughout. *Julian is a Mermaid* (Love 2018) celebrates self-expression and intergenerational complicity. *Olivia and the Fairy Princesses* (Falconer 2013) questions normative feminine models through humour.

We also include *Storie con la CAA 3* (Magni et al. 2014), a volume of three pictogram-supported stories designed for children with complex communication needs. The book offers an introduction to augmentative and alternative communication and opens up new ways of accessing texts and their literary value. Functional diversity is especially well represented in *María y yo* (Gallardo 2008), where everyday life with his autistic daughter becomes an honest and tender narrative.

Other books highlight multiple ways of being in the world. *We're all different* (Turner 2022), *Someone Just Like You* (Docherty 2024), and *The Great Big Book of Families* (Hoffman 2012) provide panoramic views of childhoods that differ in abilities, family structures, religions, orientations, and bodies. *All About Diversity* (Brooks 2022) offers a kaleidoscopic vision of difference. For adolescent audiences, *Understanding adolescence for Girls: A Body-Positive Guide to Puberty*

(Pietruszczak 2021) presents a feminist and affective approach to bodily change.

Phileas' Fortune (De Lestrade 2016) speaks to the right to speak and to name the world. *Thank you. Story of a Neighbourhood* (Bonilla 2021) celebrates community life and the ethics of care. *Finally, Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* (Favilli & Cavallo 2016) compiles the lives of rebellious women who break the mold.

Our walk could continue with picturebooks like *Soc d'un poble* (Figueras Tortras 2020) or comics like *Manu y Moha* (Aakeson 2023), which depict intercultural coexistence and the importance of acknowledging cultural differences in our communities. *Perro azul* (Nadja 2019) touches on friendship and the acceptance of difference, and *My Own Way: Celebrating Gender Freedom for Kids* (Estrela 2010) challenges traditional gender roles, encouraging freedom of expression and gender identity. *Historia revisada de las mujeres* (Radziwill 2023) highlights women's historical contributions, and *The Day War Came* (Davies 2018) tells the story of a refugee girl, exploring empathy and solidarity among children, in contrast with the harshness and neglect generated by war.

We could go on naming more books, because fortunately, the great library of humanity offers infinite routes and walks where one can get lost and found. But we'll stop here.

Before we go, we want to clarify that some of the books cited here have not yet been translated into your language. In our dialogue, six different languages were spoken, and we felt it was important to include all the titles, even if in your context only a few may be available. In the bibliography, you will find the references in all the languages for which we found editions. But the titles themselves are not the most important thing. What matters is that **this exercise might inspire you to build and review your own classroom collections and reading lists according to the needs of each group of children and young people in your organizations and schools—something no one can do better than you, who are there with them every day.**

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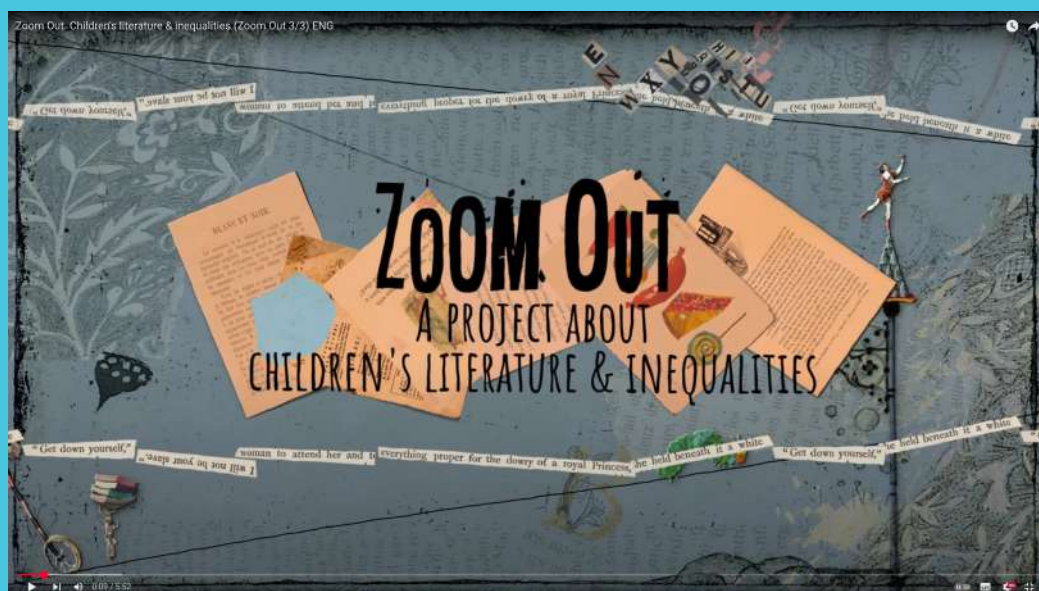
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HANSEL AND GRETEL EAT THE WITCH'S HOUSE: STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTION METHODOLOGIES

Afraid and hungry, how could they resist the temptation of a house made of sweets? The paradise of sweetness hides another reality: a wicked witch has trapped them in a deadly snare with the intention of devouring them. But Hansel and Gretel, far from giving up, with cunning and bravery, will manage to turn the situation around and free themselves.

Inspired by their cleverness and courage, this section explores the strategies and intervention methodologies we can apply to address inequalities in the classroom, creating spaces that encourage freedom, reflection, and transformation.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vt631FbDt60>

**SCAN THE QR CODE
TO WATCH THE VIDEO**



12

Literary conversations: from the individual reader to the reading community

Vanesa Amat-Castells (Universitat de Vic-Universitat Central de Catalunya)

The conversation around a literary work is a transformative practice, an opportunity for each reader to deepen their interpretation by comparing it with that of others. It is, therefore, a meeting place between one's own reading, which involves connecting different elements of the work with individual experiences and knowledge, and the reading of other people who bring their own backgrounds into play. In the words of Silva-Díaz (2006: 135), "Conversations about literature create in the classroom interpretive communities in which each reader can offer the collective their meanings, including the most personal ones and receive them back, with the imprint of others, transformed, but no less their own".

In the classroom, these oral exchanges allow students to realize how literature seeks our emotional involvement, interrogates our reality from the book, establishes constructions between the elements and uses details to build global meanings (Colomer 2001). To train literary readers, that is to say, readers who connect with the works, understand the literary conventions

and can value the creation of the author, it is necessary to broaden the horizons of personal reading: "the ways of exploring literary works, of saying and dissenting about them, are not configured in isolation but in the friction of the individual with heritage and other contemporaries" (Siro 2005: 47).

The process of verbalizing one's own ideas is already an opportunity for students to improve their ability to think.

Many of the participants in the conversation do not

know what they are thinking until they find the space that pushes them to somehow organize the ideas suggested by the reading in order to convey them in a shared context:

In essence, talking about literature is a form of shared contemplation. Booktalk is a way of giving form to the thoughts and emotions stimulated by the book and by the meaning(s) we make together out of its text – the imaginatively controlled messages sent from the author that we interpret in whatever way we find useful or delightful (Chambers 1996: 12)

When carrying out literary conversations in the classroom, it is appropriate to formulate questions, such as: which works will be read, how they will be chosen and how this reading will be approached (individual, collective, guided, etc.), what will be the grouping with which the conversation will develop, and, above all, what will be the role of the adult in order to welcome and improve the reading responses. Based on these questions, some considerations are set out below: the works, the groupings, the mediation of the adult and, finally, the readers' answers.

THE WORKS

The interventions of the readers vary according to the personal background and social context of each one, but also the type of conversation they are used to having in the classroom, the periodic repetition of the practice and the characteristics of the works. On this aspect it is important to propose different types of readings, being aware of the various possibilities they offer. Obviously, the poem, the tale or the picture book are formats that facilitate reading aloud by the adult and the rereading of the text during the conversation. In the case of the novel, it is interesting to guide the reading, either by having conversations by chapter or by asking students to prepare a document in



which they collect doubts and impressions or point out highlighted fragments, to prepare the subsequent conversation.

In any case, the choice should be drawn up by the teacher, considering the criteria of quality and variety, to ensure that students can get to know works that allow them to advance in their reading and writing skills and to ensure that they have access to a corpus of readings that they will hardly be able to discover on their own. To make the students participate in the selection process, it can be interesting for the teacher to propose a previous choice, which is presented to the class in such a way as to generate expectations in the readers, and then propose the joint choice of the work to be read and on which the conversation will focus.

The analysis of different literary conversations shows that works that present some interpretative challenge generate more reflective and critical discussions. Thus, the confusion caused by unconventional elements, such as an open denouement or a metaphorical title, tend to give rise to deeper debates, based on the juxtaposition of ideas or relationships between fictions. Even though the majority of students value readings that are closer and easier to them more positively, because they lead to more relaxed exchanges and more closed resolutions, works with interpretative complexity give rise to more reflective ideas in a literary key. For example, the album *The authentic story of the three little pigs* by Jon Scieszka with illustrations by Lane Smith (Thule 2007), a story that starts from the folk tale but changes many elements because it is told by the wolf in the first person, generates in the first readers an intense debate about the authenticity of the story and its elements, based on the comparison between the versions (Amat 2015).

THE TEACHER'S MEDIATION

Chambers (1996) highlights three shared situations that occur during literary conversations: sharing enthusiasm, confusion and connections with one's own life or with other fictions. Therefore, teachers must avoid oral exchanges

that aim to reduce reading to the unit, that is to say, that seek unique answers and guide the student along a closed path. It is important to welcome their spontaneous reactions, especially when the text has multiple interpretations (Tauveron 2002). The contexts in which the conversations take place and the subjects who participate in them are heterogeneous and this makes it difficult to establish limited action guidelines for teachers. However, it can be determined that they need to have an attentive listening attitude and let the students ask questions. Mediators should foster spaces where children's interpretations can appear and help them expand and develop them. It should also be borne in mind that, beyond the teacher's interventions, the praise or comments of peers can influence the fact that a student accepts his own statements and maintains them in different contexts.

To carry out quality literary conversations it is necessary to promote the connection between the interiority of the readers and the author's vision of the world, favor the articulation of readers' interpretations with the textual clues that support them and propose challenges that make them realize the effects produced by certain expressive resources of the works (Siro 2005). **The mediation task of the adult is key to welcoming personal ideas that the reading raises but, above all, to lead the conversations towards deeper observations.**

It is advisable to avoid that the dynamic is established solely in the expression of personal issues and that it departs excessively from the literary features of the work. It should be borne in mind that the most inferential reflections or the relationships between fictions do not usually appear spontaneously and require questions from the teacher.

At the beginning of the conversation the mediator must raise more general questions, which revolve around personal



preferences or confusions, and then formulate more specific ones, which depend on the elements that make up the work that has been read. Along these lines, and based on the considerations presented by Tauveron (2002), Chambers (1996) and Amat (2015), the following types of questions can be followed:

- Start the conversation with open and receptive formulas such as “what do you think?”, “what do you want to say about what we have read?”. It is about conveying the desire to remain open to all kinds of contributions and to offer them time to think. Students can start by expressing obvious aspects to progress, with the help of the adult, in the discovery of deeper meanings, which require more elaboration: “It is by sharing what is obvious that we begin to think what none of us has thought before” (Chambers 1996: 44).
- Formulate questions that help them reason out their answers, which initially tend to be literal: “why do you say that?”, “why do you think so?”
- Ask questions that help you put yourself in the place of the creator: “why do you think the author did it this way?”
- Expand the answers and promote the participation of all group members: “and then?”, “what do you mean?”, “do you agree?”
- Encourage relationships between fictions, for example: “does it remind you of another work?”

READING ANSWERS

Any reading generates certain responses from the reader. The teacher must be sensitive to all kinds of answers, welcome them, value them, and look for ways to make them more reflective and profound. In several research works—Sipe (2008), Fittipaldi (2012), Amat (2015), etc.—the most common children's reading responses have been classified into several sections, which can be grouped into: literary aspects (global assessments, of constituent elements of the works such as the outcome, the title or the characters, of textual or visual aspects, etc.); personal aspects (linked to experiences, moral or ethical judgments, knowledge of the world, etc.) and aspects linked to

the literary event (intertextual or media relations, recipients of the works, etc.).

Below are presented, by way of example, some situations taken from conversations with 2nd-grade children (between 6 and 7 years old), which invite reflection (Amat 2015). Focusing attention on the literary elements brings out their reading background, as shown in this excerpt about an open denouement:

Mediator: What do you think of this ending?

Roger: That there are things missing.

Patricia: Yes, yes.

Binta: A happy ending is missing.

In another conversation, Clàudia, whose family is originally from Ghana, after the shared reading of a picture book that tells a story set in Africa, states that what she liked the most is an illustration showing a woman with a bucket of clothes on her head. When asked why she liked it, she answered “because they do it in my country too”. She maintains this argument in written proposals for reflection and also in subsequent conversations, in rereading activities of the work. A situation that can exemplify how personal aspects, or what the student perceives in some way as defining cultural traits, are deeply important in the assessment of works. On the contrary, in the relationships between fictions, some students connect the readings with fashionable audiovisual proposals that are shared by most children, showing that they have a very homogeneous cultural base. A fact that is also shown in literary conversations in the university context, in the initial training of teachers, in which there are students who are surprised when they read works where there are references to places, such as names of towns, that are close and familiar to them (Amat 2023), since their usual readings are part of a globalized context.

In short, conversations must be developed at different educational stages that contemplate the intimate and shared aspects that come together in the act of reading because, in the words of M. Petit: “reading continues to be an irreplaceable experience, where the intimate and the shared are indissolubly linked” (2001: 32).

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13

Safe Space, Safe Bet? From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces Through Children's Literature

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*There is no such thing as a "safe space" –
We exist in the real world.
We all carry scars and have caused wounds.
This space
seeks to turn down the volume of the world outside,
and amplify voices that have to fight to be heard
elsewhere.*

*This space will not be perfect.
It will not always be what we wish it to be
But it will be our space together,
and we will work on it side by side.*

Beth Strano's untitled poem

Let us imagine a children's book as a house. Inside, we can find mirrors reflecting children's own lives, windows offering glimpses into the lives of others, and doors inviting them to step into new worlds. It is a structure that can feel familiar and comforting or challenging and unsettling.

This metaphor, inspired by Rudine Sims Bishop's work (1990), helps us open a chapter which invites us to reimagine discussions around inequalities in and through children's literature, creating a site where relief and challenge coexist, and opportunities abound. **As adults accompanying children, we must ask ourselves: how far are we willing to accompany them on their literary and learning journey? Will we help them open those doors that we deem troubling, and unveil those mirrors that are not so flattering? Will we teach them to see the cracks on the walls? Will we walk with them down corridors when the destination is not clear?**

Discussing inequalities with children in and through literature is challenging work. While some books offer a gentle way of sparking conversations on empathy and fairness (see chapter 6), others reproduce the very inequalities we aim to question. The colonial gaze of *Tintin in the Congo* or the heteronormativity that is reinforced in countless newer versions of fairytales reflect the biases of their time and our own. Approaching

the inequalities embedded in books, including the classics, allows us to approach inequalities present in the classroom, inviting children to critically reflect on them (see chapter 13). However, opening certain discussions might create tensions, friction and ultimately harm, with the possibility of reproducing the same inequalities that we strive to overcome. The possibility of building a strong, reliable and open transformative space for this end constitutes the core of this chapter's discussion.

REVISITING THE SAFE SPACE

Children engage with both physical environments when they read, such as the classroom, and interpretive or cognitive spaces created through the act of reading. It is within these spaces that children encounter difference and begin to grapple with complex realities. When we think about creating environments that encourage openness, inclusivity and social justice, we might consider the concept of a 'safe space' referring to the dynamics within the classroom or to the read book itself. **However, focusing on creating a 'safe space' might prove insufficient, both when the stories themselves invite discomfort, provoke tensions, or reveal unsettling truths, and when the classroom is traversed by power relations and intersecting**

axes of oppression (gender, social class, race, etc.). To explore this, we will introduce the shift of focus from the 'safe space' to the evolving paradigm of the 'brave space', a space that acknowledges discomfort, fosters critical dialogue, and sees transformation as a necessary risk.

The idea of a safe space has its roots in activism, particularly in feminist, LGBTQ+ and anti-racist movements of the 20th century. For instance, Hill Collins (2000) explains how this exclusionary activist practice would foster Black women's empowerment and their "ability to participate in social justice projects" (110). These spaces were envisioned as sanctuaries: environments where individuals could speak, act, and exist free from hostility or harm, "self-define" (Hill Collins 2000) and collectively work towards a social justice project.

In classrooms, this concept often translates to creating environments where students feel protected "from psychological or emotional harm" (Holley & Steiner 2005: 50). Moreover, unlike activist safe spaces, classrooms present the unique challenge of involving all students as participants, regardless of their backgrounds or experiences. Safety, in the context of working with children's literature, could entail more than avoiding harm; it is about curating reading experiences that invite both support and exploration. Here, safety could also engage with representation, this is, ensuring children see themselves reflected in books, affirming their identities and experiences (Boggs 2022). It can

also involve empathy by introducing stories that expand children's understanding of the world and foster cultural awareness in avoiding harmfully reductive portrayals of certain social groups (see chapters 10 and 6). More tangibly, it could also entail discussing certain issues only among those with similar lived experiences shaped by specific identities or positions along axes of oppression. Taking this into account, the notion of safety must be stretched, it becomes about creating a literary space that feels welcoming while laying the groundwork for deeper, braver engagement.

The limitations of the concept of safe space, and of safety more broadly, have increasingly come under scrutiny. In general, the term has been problematised, in part, "because all learning requires risk" (Stephenson, Dobson & Ali 2023) and may create a false sense of security (Boostrom 1998). Moreover, the pursuit of safety could lead to avoidance: a reluctance to engage with difficult topics or challenge dominant systems. Therefore, can a space truly be safe if it avoids discomfort? What happens when safety and critical engagement (inevitably) come into tension? And how do we balance the need for protection with the need for provocation?

This tension may be resolved, in part, by reframing what we understand by 'safety' across both the physical and the literary dimensions. Safety need not imply the absence of challenge. Just as a reader can experience fear or unease while engaging with a horror story, yet do so within the secure frame of fiction, children



can navigate unsettling ideas in a book while remaining held by the structures of classroom care. Risks can thus coexist with a sense of containment, making safety and challenge not mutually exclusive, but interdependent. **In this sense, safety becomes not the elimination of discomfort, but the presence of trust, care, and intentional boundaries that allow discomfort to be generative rather than harmful.**

bell hooks (1994) helps us push this thinking further in the physical context of the classroom. She reminds us that what appears as a neutral or even “safe” classroom can feel anything but, especially for students of colour. “It is the absence of a feeling of safety”, she writes, “that often promotes prolonged silence or lack of student engagement” (39). Safety, then, cannot be presumed, it must be co-created. And crucially, hooks shifts the focus from safety to community, rooted in shared purpose and openness. Drawing on Freire, she writes: “We must build community in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor” (40). From this perspective, safety is not a static condition but a relational achievement, one that emerges from connection and collective responsibility, in both classroom practices and interpretive encounters with literature.

This reframed understanding of safety opens the door to more dynamic forms of engagement, where complexity, conflict, and transformation are not only possible but welcomed. In this spirit, Arao and Clemens (2013) introduced the concept

of the brave space, urging educators to embrace discomfort as a necessary condition for learning. In brave spaces, conflict is not feared but seen as generative. Participants are encouraged to take risks, to confront their assumptions, and to listen to others with openness. For child readers, it can involve encountering narratives that may unsettle or provoke them: a story that challenges their worldview or a character whose practices disrupt familiar norms. Even the most stereotyped portrayal of a character can become a point of entry for brave engagement, if critically unpacked in conversation. By either embracing some books’ uncomfortable narratives or critically engaging with seemingly neutral ones, learning and transformation are triggered in brave spaces.

Brave spaces are inherently liminal, they function as thresholds where identities, ideas, and beliefs are negotiated. Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of the ‘third space’ helps describe this space of hybridity where cultural meanings are not fixed but constantly reinterpreted. Children’s literature, too, inhabits this in-between space where intersecting identities meet, where readers confront difference, and where possibilities for understanding and action emerge. Moreover, Shelton et al. (2019) suggest that brave spaces could lead to conversations from an intersectional perspective that better tackle “the multiple sources of inequities” (114). Brave spaces allow us to move beyond fixed identity categories and to recognise each other’s positions along different axes of oppression, understanding that they affect everyone, but their effects are different



depending on one's position.

Finally, drawing on Bakhtin's idea of dialogical space, in brave spaces or classrooms, multiple voices or interpretations of a text coexist and contend with one another. Rather than seeking consensus or comfort, brave spaces expect heteroglossia and tension.

WORKING FROM BRAVE SPACES

In view of the above, we can highlight some general guidelines suggested by Cristiaensen et al. (2023) on "How can safe spaces evolve into brave(r) spaces?". The following strategies are "ranked from more comfortable to more change-oriented": (1) "Take a look at other brave spaces, even at those groups where there is not an obvious common ground". (2) "Active introduction of debate techniques in the safe space", like mediation and theatre techniques, Socratic dialogue, etc. (3) "Introduction of outsiders and other visions and arguments into the safe space". (4) "Leave the safe space, step out and act in the public space". These four methods help us further concretise the creation of a brave space and practical examples within each one can be found in the abovementioned report.

In the context of group discussions and classroom dynamics, especially when creating a literary circle (Helgeson 2017), we can also use some practical approaches to address inequalities in and through children's literature while creating and maintaining a brave space (see chapter 19). Regarding the physical dimension of reading, we can identify the following strategies:

- Establishing ground rules early in the process (Beschoner, Ferrero & Burnett 2021) is an imperative action which encourages respect among children and accountability. Co-creating these rules with students, for example, in terms of what it means to listen actively or to speak thoughtfully, sets the tone for respectful conversations. It also involves shaping the expectations in the group (Flensner & Von de Lippe 2019). If conflict is probable in a given context, mediation techniques can be of use. For instance, a "Classroom Conflict Mediation

Plan" (Wright, Etchells & Watson 2018: 35) could be developed. This is "a set of sequential steps to follow when conflicts arise in the classroom" so students are empowered to take control of conflicts (see Wright, Etchells & Watson 2018 for the steps for developing and implementing this Plan).

- Arranging flexible layouts like circular or small-group formats that can encourage non-hierarchical dynamics. This is especially relevant when considering that in participant dynamics, literary circles (see chapter 14) can sometimes derail into conversations crossed by "economic disparities, strong student animosity, and racial and gender tension" that can have "powerful influences on how these students discuss texts" (Clarke & Holwadel 2007: 22). Therefore, using tools like "Sharing the Airtime minilesson" (Clarke & Holwadel 2007), in which the teacher gives poker chips to students and every time they talk, they give one of them away, can help them reflect on their use of turns and space and its relation to their positions along axes of inequalities.
- Offering students the possibility of having "quiet" areas in case they feel overwhelmed or need a time-off on some discussions could be especially relevant, since "marginalised students may express their discomfort by quiet compliance, or by loud distractions" (Harper & Parkin 2023). However, a potential risk of this approach is that students with less power or those who face discrimination in the group might leave the space, while students with more power could remain, thus perpetuating existing power imbalances.
- Creating opportunities for dialogue, using reflective questions and group discussions. Educators can facilitate this by posing questions like: "What voices are missing from this story? What would happen if we told it differently?" (see Toolbox activity "Gender-Swapped Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm").

On the other hand, regarding the interpretive or cognitive dimension of reading, we can identify different strategies:

- Having books in the classroom or school

libraries that are mindful of diversity in terms of gender, origin, colour, etc. can generate a counter-narrative that helps children understand their environment as supportive. In this sense, Boutte, Hopkins & Waklatsi (2008) consider that the key “is not necessarily to discard favourite or ‘classic’ books but to examine the entire collection of books across grade levels to discern if there are voids that need to be filled or necessary updates that need to be made” (959).

- Situating texts within their historical and sociocultural contexts. In this line, gathering the background knowledge of children on specific topics is essential to understand the lens through which they are interpreting the text (Lobron & Selman 2007).
- Facilitating critical dialogue and incorporating the “response” of the readers, to foster open-ended and reflective dialogue and process complex ideas and emotions in low-pressure environments. In this line, accepting the responsibility of the intentions and impact of our words is essential and even though it can be overwhelming for some, it is a condition to participate in a brave space (Nelson 2024).

NAVIGATING THE COMPLEXITIES OF BRAVE SPACES

Despite their advantages, brave spaces are not without challenges. Firstly, teachers and students may resist discussions around difficult or politicised topics, i.e. “controversial issues” (Flensner & Von der Lippe 2019), which often require nuanced contextual knowledge. Secondly, discomfort must be managed carefully to avoid the revictimisation of some children. As Verduzco-Baker (2018) notes, a brave space can be problematic when the emphasis is put on children in discriminated positions, and their trauma and braveness become the focus of the conversation. In that case, marginalised children might become the ones carrying the burden of teaching others. Lastly, the practical implementation of brave spaces is constrained by issues of accessibility and resources. Many classrooms lack access to diverse, high-quality texts, or the knowledge to

apply support mechanisms to generate spaces for exposure while maintaining care. In this sense, training grounded in anti-racist and feminist theories is crucial for the successful creation of such spaces, as these frameworks have long engaged with the challenges they entail.

Creating these spaces requires educators to strike a delicate balance between offering containment and embracing discomfort. In this sense, practicing an “ethic of discomfort” (Foucault 2007: 121) becomes relevant as it invites us to “tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty and to question one’s own assumptions and the conceptual frameworks according to which one apprehends the world” while also keeping a “modesty regarding what one can achieve” (Knittel 2019: 380). Adults must be willing to make room for surprise, contradiction, and complexity while acknowledge that we may not change the world, but we can still influence how children learn to engage with it.

Building on this, the concept of “communities of disagreement” (Iversen 2018) offers a compelling extension. These communities are regarded as a “group with identity claims, consisting of people with different opinions, who find themselves engaged in a common process, in order to solve shared problems or challenges” (Iversen 2018: 10). Like brave spaces, there is no promise of “safety and comfort” but rather “they allude to bravery, courage and controversy” (Flensner & Von der Lippe 2019: 284).

Building brave spaces to work on inequalities in and through children’s literature is not merely about fostering critical reading skills or passively instructing on inequalities. It becomes, instead, a medium through which children can inhabit complexity, encounter difference, and rehearse more just ways of being in the world. Through stories, children can learn to question norms, confront biases, and imagine alternative futures in line with social justice. By acknowledging that growth often stems from tension and dialogue, and without naiveté, we create environments where children feel both supported and challenged.

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14

Restorative Circles Applied to Addressing Inequalities through Children's Literature

Teresa Denis, Andrea Pérez, Judith Tamayo & Jèssica Balcells (Escola Joan Mir ó)

How can we create a space of refuge and safety within a classroom? How can we ensure that children feel safe sharing their opinions and experiences, knowing that their words will remain within a circle, maintaining confidentiality and being protected with respect and care?

It is often believed that the restorative approach is only useful for managing problems or conflicts. However, in reality, its most important aspect is the **proactive actions taken to prevent conflicts and create a positive environment for coexistence**.

Restorative practices originate from restorative justice and provide tools to prevent, detect, intervene in, and repair conflicts or problems in various settings. Their main goal is to improve coexistence and strengthen emotional bonds among those involved, promoting conflict management based on responsibility and reparation. This approach calls on the entire educational community to take responsibility for collective well-being, prevent any form of violence, and respond to incidents in a constructive manner.

The Global Restorative Approach (GRA) provides proactive methodologies to create kind, inclusive, and safe environments where everyone can fully develop their potential. At the same time, it offers responsive strategies based on responsibility and reparation, avoiding blame and focusing on restoring harm. This approach is rooted in essential values such as openness, honesty, respect, inclusion, participation, autonomy, freedom, cooperation, solidarity, and appreciation of differences. It also involves a shift in perspective in managing coexistence, prioritizing proactive and preventive aspects and developing key skills such as attentive, active, and empathetic listening, as well as nonviolent communication. Ultimately, the GRA promotes a more humane and respectful

coexistence, offering effective tools to address conflicts from a transformative perspective.

In schools, the restorative circle is a methodology that emphasizes the importance of community, relationship-building, responsibility, and trust. **These spaces aim to raise students' awareness of the real impact of their actions on others, whether in interpersonal conflicts or in situations of lack of commitment to cooperative tasks.** Teachers facilitate an understanding of the consequences of students' actions. This understanding, combined with the opportunity to repair harm and relationships cooperatively, can generate positive changes in both behavior and relationships.

Additionally, **restorative circles serve as a valuable tool for addressing conflicts arising from cultural or social inequalities, such as insults, stereotypes, or disagreements stemming from different worldviews.**

These spaces provide a safe environment where the origins of conflicts can be explored, and respectful dialogue can be promoted. In this regard, children's literature can play a key role: through stories that reflect situations of inequality or diversity, discussions can be generated that help students empathize with other realities, recognize biases, and develop a more critical and inclusive perspective.



When students affected by a conflict participate in a restorative circle, they can express their feelings and needs in a safe space, feel heard and acknowledged, take responsibility, and repair harm. This process includes both those directly involved in the conflict and those who have been affected by its consequences, fostering an atmosphere of respect, free from judgment, and using nonviolent language. In this space, viewpoints are shared, motives and needs are expressed, and each person takes responsibility for their part. This open dialogue allows for the development of improvement proposals that not only contribute to repairing relationships but also promote mutual respect, appreciation, and overall well-being within the group.

THE FIVE PRINCIPLES OF THE RESTORATIVE MODEL

Transforming Conflict is a restorative model based on five key principles for managing relationships effectively, not only in conflict situations but also in daily life at school and in the classroom. This approach, developed by Belinda Hopkins (Hopkins 2004; 2011), offers practical tools to foster coexistence and create safe and inclusive learning environments. These restorative principles serve as the foundation for the five restorative questions, which guide personal reflection, dialogue, active listening, and, ultimately, connection with oneself and the educational community—including teachers, families, and students. This model also structures the five phases of any restorative process, which necessarily requires the participation of an impartial facilitator to ensure a fair and balanced development of the process.

1. Everyone has a unique and valuable perspective.

Each person has their own perspective, which is unique and valuable. It is essential to provide an opportunity for everyone to express their viewpoint so that they feel heard. Imposing one's perspective without allowing others to share theirs is inappropriate. Respecting all viewpoints is particularly crucial in environments where some individuals may have more power or authority than others, as this helps create a more equitable and inclusive atmosphere.

2. Thoughts influence emotions, and emotions influence actions. Thoughts and emotions are key to understanding why people act the way they do. However, they are often invisible. If we imagine an iceberg, thoughts and emotions lie beneath the surface, hidden from view. Exploring this hidden part of the iceberg allows for a deeper understanding of what is happening within each individual, leading to mutual understanding and more authentic connections.

3. Reflecting on who may have been affected by our actions fosters empathy and consideration. Anticipating the consequences of our actions is essential for maintaining healthy relationships. When conflicts or disagreements arise, they often cause discomfort or suffering, manifesting as emotions such as anger, pain, fear, frustration, and confusion. Taking the time to reflect on how our actions affect others with empathy can be key to improving the situation and restoring harmony.

4. When our needs are met, we can give our best. In order to make decisions or solve problems, it is essential first to identify our needs and then develop appropriate strategies to meet them.

5. People in conflict or experiencing a problem are best positioned to find their own solutions. People value being involved in the process of resolving issues that affect them. They tend to resist imposed solutions. Taking ownership of conflict resolution and decision-making demonstrates respect and trust, fosters the development of prosocial skills, strengthens self-esteem, and reinforces connections between individuals.

BUT HOW CAN WE ORGANIZE A DIALOGUE CIRCLE?

Before starting a restorative circle, the facilitator typically uses a talking piece, which is passed sequentially from hand to hand. When a participant holds the talking piece, they may speak if they wish, while the rest listen.

The talking piece encourages respect and listening, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to express themselves. It is advisable to discuss with the participants which object to use. Initially, the teachers can provide one, but involving the group in selecting an object from the beginning is beneficial.

The talking piece has been used ancestrally in circles conducted by aborigine North American and African communities. For example, a stick or stone has been used to pass the word. The stone, in particular, regulates speaking time; when it warms up to body temperature, it is time to pass it on. Managing speaking time is important, and the facilitator should remind the group of this.

Hopkins (2011) emphasizes the importance of the “right to pass.” Participation should be guaranteed for all but used freely. No one should feel pressured to participate, with the hope that over time, most people will feel safe to do so.

No one should feel pressured to participate, with the aim that over time most people will feel safe doing so. Sometimes this can take weeks.

Use of the object that gives the floor:

- The object passes from hand to hand sequentially, usually to the left.
- When a person receives the object, they can speak, but they are not obliged to do so.
- Once you have the object you can speak, the rest listen with respect (both verbally, without interrupting, but also gesturally - you have to be careful with gestures or other signs of reproach or jokes). The object aims to promote respect and listening.
- Once the object has gone all the way around, people who have not participated can be offered the possibility to do so.
- Objects must be soft and cannot be made to “fly” by throwing them between them. If they have to go overboard, it is good that we send them from hand to hand, or that they go on the ground.

As this methodology involves different activities, it is good to establish a signal to find calm and capture the attention of the participants without shouting. You can propose the hand signal in the air that works as follows: when you raise your

hand we ask the person or people who see us to also raise it and be silent. Keep your hand up until the whole group has seen it and is silent. The group is asked if it agrees to do this. This sign can be negotiated with the group. It is important that everyone agrees with the signal so that it does not become an imposed control mechanism.

Once we have chosen the word object and the listening signal, we must indicate to the students what are the basic rules to take into account in a restorative circle:

- We speak and listen from the heart.
- Everything that is said stays in the circle.
- You can't say names in the circle.
- We can only speak when we have the object.
- It is voluntary to speak when I have the object.

PHASES OF A RESTORATIVE CIRCLE IN THE CLASSROOM

- 1. Introduction:** Welcome and reminder of circle rules.
- 2. Opening Round:** An initial question to promote mutual understanding.
- 3. Mixing Activity:** A game to mix the group and build relationships.
- 4. Main Activity:** A topic to discuss using cooperative techniques.
- 5. Reflection:** A round to reflect on the main activity.
- 6. Energizing Activity:** A physical or cooperative game.
- 7. Closing Round:** A final round where each person shares their key takeaway from the circle.

Restorative thinking requires time: time for reflection, for questioning and unlearning deeply ingrained patterns from the traditional educational system, and for continuous training in managing children's relationships from a restorative perspective. This means leaving behind the punitive approach that often defines our society. As Dominic Barter claims: “Conflict is not a problem that needs solving but a phenomenon that needs understanding”.

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15

Transforming Picturebooks into a Bridge of Communication and Possibility in Educational Operational Practice

Vincenza Basta, Sara Fusco & Federica Piccolo (Il Pungiglione)

Elena Fierli & Sara Marini (Scosse)

This chapter stems from the collaboration between two Italian social organizations with different backgrounds. On one side, it draws from the experience of Il Pungiglione, a social cooperative that works with young individuals of various developmental profiles or those facing family and/or social vulnerability and fragility. On the other, this long-standing and profound experience has provided Associazione SCOSSE with the opportunity to explore the most effective tools to address certain operational challenges. The Association, for its part, focuses on gender education and deconstruction of stereotypes and prejudices in educational dynamics through picture books.

IL PUNGIGLIONE

During the development of the Zoom Out project, we've asked ourselves several times what was missing from educational tools aimed at young people, in order to make them effectively accessible. Il Pungiglione's experience working with minors involves two macro-groups of children and their families. On the one hand, the target considers socio-environmental vulnerability, and on the other developmental disabilities.

In the first case, educational services are aimed at young people coming from situations of socio-economic fragility, educational poverty and different at-risk family situations. Within this area we can find services for the prevention of institutionalization, child safeguarding, supervised meetings and the management of high-conflict families, protecting the right to coparent.

One of the greatest challenges is precisely the one concerning the narrative of the family's situation. Simply put, it is complex to explain to a seven-year-old child who comes to meet either

parent, under the supervision of educators or psychologists, why they cannot go home with their parent. In such sensitive –and unfortunately numerous– cases, the help of picture books can be crucial. The use of stories and characters through visual images could support the understanding of their family's circumstances. Illustrated books could support a reading that highlights both their emotional history, and any potential or growth opportunities tied to their experience. To address the narrative of the child's family context in situations of vulnerability and estrangement of one of the parents, the picture book "I am a child, I am a child" was used where Matthew, who claims that being a child is serious, reports the thoughts of his friends. Said, Mariem, Manuél, Emily, Li, Omar, and Alina tell what a child needs to grow up. For example, Omar says that *"girls and boys have places to be, designed for them: a house with their room inside, a baby bed, a shelf for their things and a rug... yes this is fundamental."* Or Said says, also through images, *"that little boys and girls are to be loved and in fact his mom says that he is her treasure or even her captain, because he knows that he will grow up and he will be able to make decisions."* This narrative made up of examples and images helps both children and adults share what strategies have been put in place to meet these basic needs of boys and girls and what can be done in the current state to make the specific child/children better off.

In another case, these services are aimed at children with intellectual disabilities, often co-diagnosed with physical and/or sensory disabilities. The work is mainly related to the socio-educational and socio-rehabilitation sphere, in terms of autonomy development, and, where necessary, parent training.

Often in these cases, resources that are related

to the world of children's and adolescent literature do not consider the recipient's functional profile. The functional profile takes on a person-centered approach, highlighting not only issues, but also strengths and opportunities for growth. We consider intellectual disabilities across the board, from profound to mild-moderate and mild-moderate disabilities, including spectrums of autism. For the latter, illustrated books lend themselves so much in terms of the sphere of learning by pictures even if the complexity of modifications tailored to specific and individual situations must always be taken into account. This is why the work of collecting accessible tools is relevant. Thanks to these channels it is possible for educational figures to support the work with the child, not only with "reading", but especially in the choice of communication and comprehension tools.

In addition to AAC, which we have discussed extensively in the next chapter 16, we have collected a number of tools that are useful in practice. Let us start with remedial tools, which are those devices, digital or paper, that each person can use to achieve their goal by compensating for their difficulties. Just think of reading aids related to the world of special educational needs such as dyslexia (<https://www.aiditalia.org/software-compensativi>).

Among compensatory tools for reading and comprehension of illustrated books and children's literature for children aged 6 to 11 with special educational needs, two key approaches emerge. The first is the use of augmented reading, which integrates text and pictures with interactive visual aids or illustrated social stories, such as those developed by Carol Gray (Erickson), to help children, in the specific case on the autism spectrum, understand emotions and social dynamics. The second is synchronized audiobooks, which combine voice reading with the visualization of highlighted text, as in the accessible books of Bookshare (<https://www.bookshare.org/bookshare-reader>) or the "Read to Me" initiative of the LIA Foundation - Libri Italiani Accessibili (<https://catalogo.fondazioneia.org/leggere-gli-ebook-con-adobe-drm#content>), encouraging

language decoding and attention adjustment through a multisensory experience.

Some tools commonly used in our operational practice with both children from vulnerable backgrounds and children with special educational needs are the use of Participation Cards and the use of Dixit cards. These highly symbolic images lend themselves to bringing out both unpleasant nuances and pleasant experiences; they help stimulate respectful storytelling about one's history and life contexts. Given the density of symbols and details, they allow the person to be able to project and share at various levels and at various steps without feeling the frustration of having to tell everything right away; they also lend themselves to being able to evoke alternatives not previously considered or in giving word through a form, to an experience that is difficult to encode.

Creative storytelling, on the other hand, can match the picture book by bridging the representation gap between characters and person. This space of abstraction and reflection is often difficult to grasp for people who carry a different functioning profile. By associating the book with the photo, visual image, or, to give a practical example, the PIPPI participation cards, one can build a bridge of materiality and physicalness, and convey primary educational messages. The PIPPI program is an Italian national initiative promoted by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy in collaboration with the University of Padua. It was created to prevent the removal of children from their family units by strengthening parenting skills and improving the well-being of children and families in vulnerable situations (such as economic poverty, social marginalization, disability, parental conflict in separation, family fragility such as parental psychiatric illness, etc.). Each project is built based on the specific needs of children and relatives through a participatory approach, actively involving families, young people and social workers.

The same support can be provided by the sensory manipulation of different materials, such as sand, biodegradable, modeling, and food-grade clay. The body can also become a vessel for the "reading" of the story in question. Through the

choice of movements, symbolic gestures, dance steps, mime, it is possible to get in touch with the body-mediated narrative.

All these tools promote efficacy when chosen with the person and for the person, in this case. The choice varies foremost on the basis of the person's aptitudes, tastes, and functioning profile and its declinations. But also on the basis of the type of activity and illustrated book, for example regarding the amount of text (if the young person presents difficulties in decoding and comprehension of written text, if there are any indications of a delay in the acquisition of reading skills, if they show difficulties in automating the reading process), the colors used for the pictures (hypersensitivity, synesthesia, marked preferences).

In short, there is a world of possibilities to be explored together with young people and storytelling, in order for their self-representation to take place not only in the message, but also and especially in the accessible experience.

SCOSSE

Collaboration and cooperation with Il Pungiglione led us to try and identify some possible responses to the diverse needs reported by them.

We have therefore identified tools, practices, and in particular books or types of **illustrated books, which not only respond to the specific needs reported, but are also able to meet the needs related to pleasure, involvement, well-being, and recognition for each person who participates in the suggested reading or activities**. So, as to attempt to recommend activities that are actually accessible for each participant, or that can be adjusted to become so.

The main and most complex tool is the perspective with which we look at books, any book. It is necessary to hone a skill that allows us to consider the multitude of needs of the people to whom we will make a recommendation, and our own needs in mediating with them.

This will enable us to unearth from books answers and solutions that are unexpected and not necessarily stated among the themes or goals of that publishing project, but also not to choose a book that may result in a specific situation disturbing or inaccessible to those who should read it.



Let's consider the significant example of a beautiful book, *Thankful* by Elaine Vickers and Samantha Cotterill, which depicts care and its importance, expressed in daily gestures and routines within a family consisting of a little

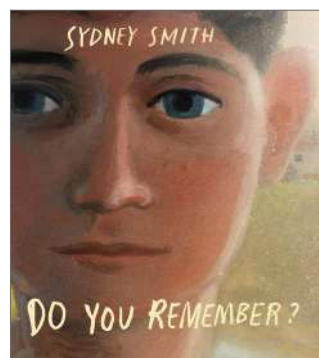
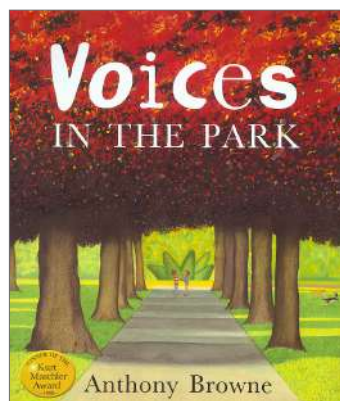
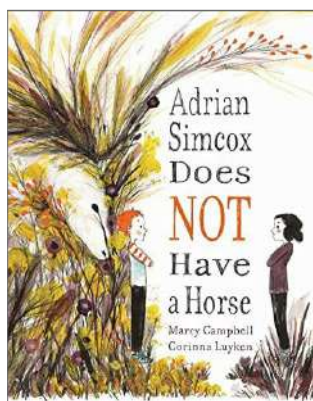
girl and her parents, a heterosexual mother and father, united and living together. The text and message, valuable and well crafted, run a very high risk of fueling discomfort and malaise in situations related to children entrusted to protection services, who might be involved in relationships of high family conflict or domestic violence. And this is true even when we aren't aware of the direct experience of whoever is listening to a book reading. Consider, for example, the sentence:

Thank you for a home that makes me feel warm and safe. Thank you for my parents, who read me stories [...]. and every night, when they tuck me in, they whisper these words to me [...].

If, therefore, without this skill, it is not possible to select "right" books in a context-free way, let us try to specify types of books that can be valuable opportunities.

The **needs identified by Il Pungiglione and that came up during trainings and exchanges of best practices are related to socio-environmental vulnerability and developmental disability**.

In the first case, these are children from situations of socio-economic fragility, educational poverty, and at risk family backgrounds of different types.



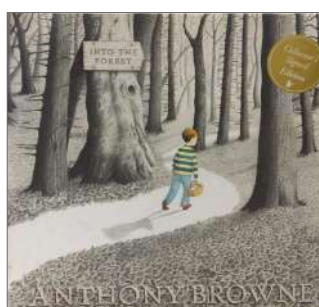
Two important books to support such contexts are Marcy Campbell's *Adrian Cox Does NOT Have a Horse* and Anthony Browne's *Voices in the Park*. Stories that depict social imbalances and inequities: Adrian lives in a tiny house in the suburbs alone with his grandfather, while his classmate lives in a posh house with a garden in a middle-class residential neighbourhood; *Voices in the Park*, from the perspective of four different protagonists, tells us about an unemployed father looking for work who comes across the lives of a wealthy mother of a family, her son, and her dog. Stories that on closer inspection also tell us about multiple family structures: a child living with his grandfather who performs parental care duties in every aspect, a child living only with his mother, one with his father. The expedient used by Anthony Browne of having the same story told with the voice and from the point of view of four different protagonists is one that is extremely useful and easily replicable for accessing stories and making them tailored to each person, enhancing and highlighting the different situations and traits.

There has also been mention of children for whom supervised meetings are arranged and who are in situations of high family conflict.

In these cases, too, illustrated books come to our aid by **offering us the many possible stories underlying this unusual paradigm (understood as unpredictable in the many different declinations that the story can contain), but also by prompting us to find possible readings and stories between the lines.**

Do You Remember? by Sydney Smith, narrates the story of a mother and son who leave their father and home, face a long road trip in which detachment and separation are the third passenger, end up in a new city, where one day

"We could say, Do you remember the first morning in our new home? It was just you and me. [...] And the sun was rising over the city. It was magical."

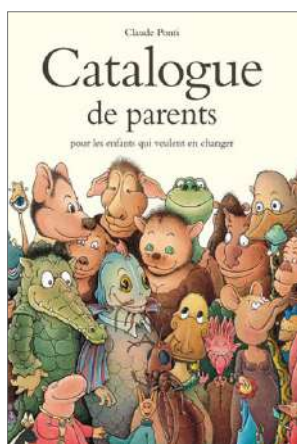


In Anthony Browne's *Into The Forest*, the main character wakes up in the morning after hearing noises at night and can no longer find his dad: *"I miss Daddy."* His mom asked him,

like a Little Red Riding Hood, to bring a cake to his grandmother, prompting him to walk through a forest inhabited by fairy tale characters, by his thoughts, and by the hope of meeting his father, in a journey of reflection in which any child can see and describe how they feel. He will finally find his father at his grandmother's and together they will return home, *"Who is it? It's just us. And Mommy came out smiling"* with arms wide open. The book ends with the two of them standing outside the door. We can read it as a story of reuniting, but it can also tell us about a walk home after time spent together, supported by the description of a positive attitude portrayed by all the main characters.

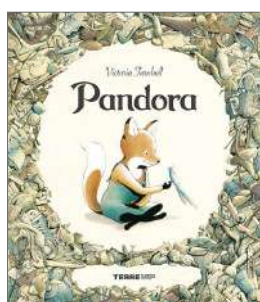


In *Dat is toch heel gewoon (De Gewoonboom)* [That's Perfectly Normal, Isn't It?] by Thais Vanderheyden, Marty Mole lives with her mom *"dad is an explorer, he left on a long journey a long time ago and there is no telling when he will return."*



In Claude Ponti's very rich *Catalogue de Parents Pour les Enfants qui Veulent en Changer* [Catalog of Parents for Children Who Want to Change Them] we include, in addition to *The Lysol* and *The Leisola*, *The Absent*: a "unisex model" represented by one suitcase inside the other.

But if we keep looking we can discover books that tell us about strong and precious bonds that are susceptible to separation, distance and rupture. Such is the case with *Pandora*, by Victoria



Turnbull, who bonds with a baby bird, cares for it, but the time will come to see it go. Yet, after a long wait and after a time spent away, the bird will return, conscious that with each reunion their bond will be

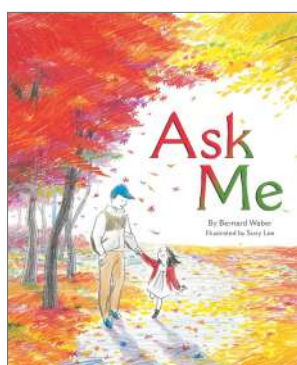
the same as before. Similarly, Kim Sena's *It's Time to Go*, in which the owl Lucy will never return,



acknowledges that their farewell is final but their bond will last forever.

Lastly, many books can offer us valuable portrayals of bonding or quality time spent with one's parents. As in the case of the little girl and her mom (but even these are assumptions, since it is a wonderful book without

words) in Suzy Lee's *Wave*; or like the little girl and



her dad in *Ask Me*, also illustrated by Suzy Lee and written by Bernard Waber.

For needs related to developmental disabilities, we feel we must make two necessary introductions.

The first concerns **illustrated books, which**

in the integration of text (often not very long) and pictures, in the use of direct language and the first person, lend themselves to different readings and interpretations that stimulate and rest on very diverse skills, facilitating participation and enabling the understanding of even very complex concepts. A complexity that on the other hand should not be underestimated when choosing books.

The second is the need for different bodies, functions, ways of expression, and abilities to be represented in children's imagery through



illustrated stories. In books such as *Laura* by Elfi Nijssen and Eline Van Lindenhuis, *On n'est pas si différents!* [We're Not So Different] by Sandra Kollender and Claire Cantais, and *À l'album per a dies de pluja* [Album for Rainy Days] by Dani Torrent, we find prosthetic limbs, hearing aids, and wheelchairs in the games and shared daily routines of childhood.

To support the work carried out by services dedicated to children with intellectual disabilities, often co-diagnosed with physical and/or sensory disabilities, publishers offer several opportunities, which always require using flexibility and expertise when choosing.

Many titles lend themselves to the need to enhance the body as a vehicle for reading, such as Eric Carle's *From Head to Toe*, Satoshi Iriyama and Annalisa Lombardo's books *Pandino cosa fa?* [What is Pandino doing?] and *Panda e Pandino cosa fanno?* [What are Panda and Pandino doing?], or Angelo Mozzillo and Marianna Balducci's *Io sono foglia* [I am a leaf], which offer an invitation to use our body, imitate gestures, movements and positions, and to capture any analogies in a direct and immediate



way through the juxtaposition of images with other animals, objects or elements of nature.

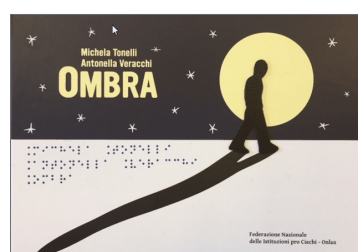
Compelling is the inspiration of books such as *Piccole Emozioni* [Little Emotions] by Sonia Maria Luce Possentini, which depicts different moods only through facial expressions and onomatopoeias, in which it is possible to mirror



oneself without a guide to interpretation.

Other very useful tools, within the subject of bodies, are: *The Manual Alphabet. Language of Italian Signs* illustrated by Roger Olmos; *Io so vestirmi*

da sola [I can dress myself] by Elena Odriozola, which supports the learning of action steps necessary in a routine; tactile books such as *Andiamo* [Let's Go] by Marcella Basso and Michele Tajariol that, thanks to a game of pockets that hide everyday objects, places everyone on the same level of exploration and discovery. Or like Michela Tonelli and Antonella Veracchi's *Ombra* [Shadow], capable of making something abstract and elusive immediately visible with the eyes and hands.



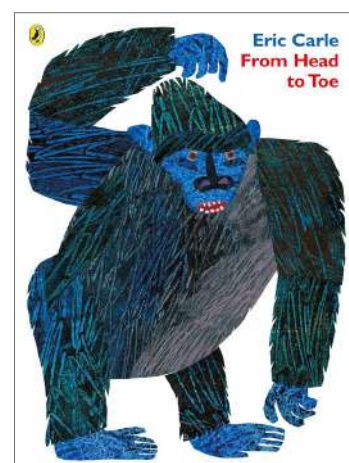
In associating narratives with the visual image, which in and of itself is the basis of the counterpoint on which picture

books develop, cards and photo books provide valuable help.

In the second case we can mention the photographer and author of children's books Tana Hoban, whose volumes have everything that is (or can be) the object of children's experiences: games, tools, shoes, the street and whatever we can encounter within it. Mostly without words, often offering macro images, these are works that invite us to get involved, to interact with the text, but also allow an immediate relationship with it.

And it is true that cards are a very useful tool for building bridges between thought and language, between people, between concepts, for describing and structuring relationships, for replacing words or for providing an opportunity to structure a narrative using one's own. The possibilities they offer are to isolate an element, to work on possible interpretations, to construct sequences that vary in length and in links they build; the connective mechanism also allows for multiplication of possibilities.

There is one text that represents for us a synthesis of so many of the instances aforementioned and that is *Tout un monde* (A Whole World) by Katy Couprie and Antonin Louchard, an inventory of images made with different artistic techniques, illustrations and photographs, dialoguing with each other, to be read in sequence or by lingering to develop observational skills. A book that has also become a deck of cards, offering with the same figures the possibilities that, as we have seen, this can represent.



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16

Intersectionality as a Method: Conceptual Framework of Functional Diversity and Methodological Proposal of Alternative Augmentative Communication (AAC)

Francesca Gaglianone, Valentina Pistoni, Vincenza Basta & Lucia Montalto

with contributions from the **Children's Area team** (Il Pungiglione)

The contribution presented here stems from the work and experience of the professionals of *Il Pungiglione*, a social cooperative active in protecting minors with disabilities and in educational planning within vulnerable contexts. This chapter originates from the educational practice of the cooperative's Minors Area, which adopts an approach centered on the functioning profile, in line with international references such as the DSM-5, the ICF-CY (International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health) by the WHO, and the Italian guidelines for Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Specific Learning Disorders (SLD). This approach is based on observing competencies, potential, personal strategies, and support needs, moving beyond a merely diagnostic or labeling perspective. Disability is thus understood not as a fixed condition but as a dynamic and interconnected set of elements, which includes the body, the mind, the context, relationships, and available tools that act as facilitators of potential and possibilities. This allows us to intervene by **focusing on the zone of proximal development and on residual**

skills that can be enhanced, **starting from motivation**, with a developmental perspective. This process takes into account the different conditions in which disability manifests itself:

- **Intellectual disabilities**, with impairments in cognitive function and varying levels of autonomy;
- **Sensory disabilities**, which require technological supports or compensatory strategies;
- **Physical disabilities**, which involve environmental adaptations and the use of specific aids;
- **Acquired disabilities**, resulting from traumatic events, including those occurring during or after conflict, or from illnesses.

In everyday life, many children express specific educational needs not only linked to their disability but also to learning disorders (such as dyslexia, dysorthography, dyscalculia), behavioral and attention disorders (such as ADHD or oppositional defiant disorder), or conditions on the autism spectrum, which require targeted attention



in communication, environmental structuring, and educational relationships. To effectively respond to this complexity, *Il Pungiglione* employs an integrated methodology that considers the various dimensions of functioning and the social and environmental context. This methodology includes:

- a) **Multidimensional Assessment**, carried out at key moments (T0, T1, T2) to monitor, adapt, and evaluate educational interventions;
- b) **Personalized Planning**, built around specific developmental goals shared with children, families, and educators;
- c) **Social Impact Assessment (SIA)**, to detect and analyze the effects of educational activities on individuals and their context.

Within this framework is the **P.I.P.P.I. Programme**, an integrated intervention model aimed at preventing institutionalization, supporting families in difficulty, and promoting inclusive and resilient educational environments. The program is based on tools such as home education, supportive proximity, parent/child groups, and the Child's World Triangle, which integrates:

- The child's developmental needs;
- Parenting skills;
- Environmental and contextual factors.

The use of the triangle allows for moving beyond individualized views, guiding interventions towards a complex and situated analysis. In this context, the use of **Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)** becomes crucial to identify the communicative and life needs of the child. The use of AAC enhances interaction with illustrated books as accessible, adaptable, and relational pedagogical tools, capable of traversing emotional, cognitive, sensory, and symbolic dimensions. This is not merely about reading a book but about building an educational

practice that allows one to narrate oneself, to be recognized, and to name what is difficult.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Educational settings, particularly schools and other institutions responsible for instruction, represent the primary environment where young citizens, including students with disabilities, are granted opportunities not only for learning and acquiring knowledge and skills but also for active participation in social and community life. According to the **Participation Model** (Beukelman and Mirenda, 1988) and the **Biopsychosocial Model** (Engel, 1977; WHO,

1988), effective interventions aimed

for children with disabilities should prioritize the creation of opportunities for meaningful communication and genuine engagement. A case in point is the use of **tactile books**. These

books combine sensory elements with visual symbols to support people with different communicative abilities in finding strategies related to everyday moments of life than in self-narrative. For example, during the Covid-19 period, a little person we follow, with the support of an AAC facilitator from our organization, created a tactile book functional for sensory and narrative sharing of the perception of experience.

Capacitism in children between the ages of 6 and 11 is manifested through educational norms, social expectations, and school environments that reward physical, cognitive, and behavioral abilities that conform to predetermined standards, while excluding or penalizing those who develop differently. This paradigm affects the construction of identity and self-esteem, conditioning how children perceive themselves and others in terms of value and competence. With this in mind, **communication becomes an essential element in breaking down stereotypes and building possibilities**. For people with complex communication needs (CCNs), who face challenges in using common communication methods, particularly verbal and written language, it is crucial



to adopt techniques, strategies and technologies that simplify and adapt instructional materials to meet their needs. One of the most effective methodologies for classroom use is **AAC, a set of strategies and techniques designed to improve and make communication accessible and usable for all**.

AAC is defined as “**Augmentative**”. It identifies strategies in order to improve the individual's existing skills (e.g., vocalizations, spoken language, gestures, or signs) within their environments. It is referred to as “**Alternative**” because it uses methods that go beyond spoken language. AAC incorporates a variety of symbolic systems, including graphical symbols (images, drawings, pictograms, words, or letters) and gestural systems (mimicry, gestures, or hand signals). Graphical systems may also require the use of supportive products. These symbols are adapted to the needs of individual with diverse ages, motor abilities, cognitive capacities, and linguistic skills.

An effective inclusive AAC intervention considers the complexity of students' adaptive functioning, which arises from the interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors, as well as the presence or absence of environmental facilitators or barriers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AAC TO ELABORATE INTERSECTIONAL PRACTICES

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) supports a multifocal approach in children's literature, integrating visual, symbolic, and technological tools to broaden the ways in which narratives are accessed. This model promotes a more dynamic and adaptive enjoyment, responding to different learning styles and communication skills. AAC also facilitates the coexistence of different perspectives within the text, enhancing comprehension and interaction among readers with heterogeneous experiences. Through this plurality of expressive codes, literature becomes a space where cognitive, sensory and cultural dimensions converge, implicitly promoting an inclusive and intersectional experience.

An intersectional approach cannot follow a predefined structure but must be tailored to the child and their social and environmental contexts. In this sense, AAC, in all its forms, serves as an inherently intersectional pedagogical method. AAC was conceived as an inclusive tool, and visual facilitation, for example, representing the first and most natural means of communication. Despite its potential to overcome barriers—not only intellectual but also socio-economic or linguistic—**visual facilitation** is often undervalued in certain contexts.

Through symbolic graphical language, **AAC can foster reflections on gender and identity representation and identify universal symbols** that reduce distances while respecting diversity. AAC does not require prerequisites, despite being mistakenly associated exclusively with software for producing pictograms, even among professionals.

The use of AAC allows for engagement with interlocutors and collaborative identification of the most effective ways to facilitate communication, support comprehension, and express needs, self-identity, and personal narratives. Facilitated access to information enables the transmission of essential messages and opportunities for life paths, regardless of



whether the recipient speaks the same language, comes from contexts of educational deprivation, or has an intellectual disability.

GUIDELINES FOR THE INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN ACTIVITIES

Within the services we provide, we encounter children with intellectual, sensory, physical, and, in some cases, acquired disabilities. The diversity of the individuals we work with reaffirms the centrality of the child's participation in constructing the most effective communication channel. By starting with the observation and understanding of the student, their family, the social system, the classroom group, and the relevant school personnel, **the Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) facilitator can co-develop and implement a tailored intervention in collaboration with the school community.** This intervention involves the use of techniques, strategies, and assistive technologies, where necessary, to foster effective learning processes aligned with the student's educational plan and to ensure active participation in their environment. **This approach enhances the child's ability to make choices and promotes self-determination,** which can be extended and generalized to other areas of life.

In educational activities, the AAC facilitator should work in constant collaboration with the support teacher and curricular teachers. After reviewing the educational intervention plan, they adapt the content of educational materials. Regular communication with the family, school staff, and the socio-healthcare network is essential for building a synergistic and systemic intervention. This participatory approach can also be applied to activities such as managing the Identity Web (see Zoom Out Toolbox), where the child collaborates to select pictograms, images, or photos that match their functional profile and preferences.

To enhance the inclusion of children with disabilities in educational activities, the following principles are essential:

- Observe, assess, and understand the child's functional profile.
- Ensure that educational content is simple and clear.
- Provide additional time for comprehension, processing, and task completion.
- Guarantee the availability and accessibility of digital tools.
- Create a welcoming, quiet, and suitable physical environment tailored to the child's functional characteristics.
- In adapting AAC content, involve the child as much as possible in choosing digital or other assistive aids, considering their functional profile.
- Symbols in AAC should be linked to tangible objects or actions.
- Organize AAC symbols into categories (e.g., actions, places, people, emotions).
- Use AAC in all contexts of the child's life as much as possible
- During communication between multiple individuals, symbols should be used interactively to facilitate the child's active participation.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on our experience, AAC holds great potential for breaking down barriers of all kinds perhaps even more than spoken language. Any activity from the Toolkit can be adapted collaboratively with the child to identify the most effective, enjoyable, and engaging communication mode. **Alternative Augmentative Communication enables the co-construction of a universal language that gives voice to all while recognizing individual uniqueness as a shared resource.**

17

Broadening Perspectives: Tools and Resources for an Inclusive Society

Aleksandra Niewiejska (Laboratorium Zmiany)

In an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to comprehend and value the variety of human diversity, backgrounds and experiences is an essential skill for school students. The concept of intersectionality popularised by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s is significant in developing a comprehensive knowledge about social inequalities and promoting inclusivity through children's education. Increasing awareness of diversity and the various ways of shaping individuals' privileges and oppressions from an early age can foster empathy, critical thinking and social responsibility as long-term benefits. Educating children about the complex ways of overlapping variables such as gender, abilities, sexuality, nation or economic status is essential to promote a holistic perception of diversity among young individuals. **Through non-formal education and children's literature, students can engage in meaningful discussions about differences and develop the skills required to engage with a diverse society.**

NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

The defining characteristic of non-formal education is that it is an addition, alternative and/or a complement to formal education within the

process of the lifelong learning of individuals (ISCED 2011, 11). Non-formal education may vary in intensity or duration and it does not have to follow a structured pathway. Additionally, this type of learning process may result in qualifications that are not formally recognized by the national education system. It usually occurs in the form of workshops or seminars for individuals of all ages. Non-formal education can be useful, among others in developing social or cultural skills (ISCED 2011). Non-formal education is also relevant for children, as it provides learning experiences through hands-on activities and experiential learning. **Non-formal education allows children to acquire knowledge by engaging in practical experiences that complement their formal education.** In a structured process designed by an educator, non-formal education helps fill knowledge gaps through real-world applications and interactive learning opportunities.

The individual is influenced educationally by both formal education institutions and activities that are not specifically intended for educational purposes, yet develop an educational character. The field of social education cannot meet all needs solely through the school institution and its curriculum (even if highly developed). Although



the school should play a leading role in the implementation of social skills, it will not achieve its intended goals if it operates in isolation and disregards the influence of non-formal (out-of-school) education (Trempała 2011).

When the influences of formal (curriculum-based) education cease, the individual is primarily influenced and shaped by the society in which they participate. Therefore, the planned work of teachers should incorporate various non-formal educational influences on children. Educators should guide children through enhancing their knowledge and personality outside of formal education. Preparing children in school for active participation in non-formal education can be achieved, among other ways, through: encouraging self-directed learning; fostering skills for living and interacting in various social groups; developing motivation for active social participation, cultivating the ability to make choices and decisions in different life situations, nurturing interests, increasing communication skills and developing the ability to appropriately use various sources of knowledge (Trempała 2011: 102). The most enduring impacts of non-formal education programs are observed in the ones (among others) that: focus on developing life skills and fostering community connections, are led by experienced facilitators and have substantial involvement from youth (Simac et al. 2019).

Last but not least, non-formal education can be characterised by several key factors: they address distinct educational needs, cater to different target groups, are organized by various educational institutions and have unique interactions with the formal education system. In this context, non-formal activities may share similar features to the formal ones. Their distinction lies in their function and relationship to the traditional educational system (as a supplement or an alternative) (Carron & Carr-Hill 1991).

DIVERSITY AWARENESS

The ability to understand that individuals' thought processes can differ even in response to the same stimulus is necessary to increase

empathy and critical thinking. Children (even second-graders) are aware of the differences in how people think but they do not presume it in all situations and may struggle to provide even a basic explanation for why these differences occur. Individuals develop such knowledge through aging. Additionally, as their cognitive abilities develop, children become more capable of recognizing that thoughts can differ and determining the causes of such differences. Rising awareness during the school years contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of individuality and uniqueness (O'Donnell Eisbach 2004).

Therefore, it is essential to foster an environment that enhances awareness of diversity, enabling children to comprehend different perspectives from an early age. Giving such opportunities can be helpful in consolidating information and avoiding cognitive dissonance in social activities. Guaranteeing that classrooms and schools are properly equipped for fostering inclusivity involves, among others, training teachers and creating suitable educational resources (Manos et al. 2021). These aspects are contained by the Zoom Out Project which equips its participants for creating safe and equal environments in schools.

We consider that literature is crucial in shaping children's perceptions of the world by offering reflective and imaginative approaches for exploring diverse perspectives and experiences. Reading introduces children to characters, cultures and circumstances beyond their



immediate environment, which fosters understanding others' points of view. Books that incorporate diverse characters and plots have the potential to challenge stereotypes, allowing young individuals to engage critically with issues of race, gender, social class, and identity.

Furthermore, reading enables children to identify with both struggles and joys of characters that represent human diversity (different nations/ appearances/ abilities/ sexuality etc.). We agree that this process promotes a more inclusive and empathetic worldview. In non-formal education, stories are powerful tools for initiating conversations that promote social awareness and critical thinking among children.

NON-FORMAL EDUCATION IN THE ZOOM OUT PROJECT

Non-formal education offers flexible interactive learning experiences that foster active participation, by emphasizing student-centred approaches. We consider these learning environments as the opportunities to explore diverse topics and to increase social skills, critical thinking and empathetic attitude. This education facilitates a dynamic exchange of knowledge, where participants can collaborate, share experiences, and engage in creative problem-solving. Additionally, these educational tools provide inclusive opportunities for personal growth and empower individuals from various backgrounds to engage with new ideas.

Therefore, the Zoom Out project contains innovative workshops and practical tools aimed at fostering social and intercultural competencies, as well as critical thinking from an intersectional perspective. The Toolbox includes both traditional resources, like worksheets, and modern tools, such as online materials. It also provides pedagogical strategies to help educators foster critical, creative, and empathetic thinking, while promoting an inclusive learning environment.

The project's Toolbox provides educators with a wide range of methods and materials which is essential in an individual approach to children's diverse needs and learning styles. These materials

reflect the principles of non-formal education, a pedagogical approach that focuses on flexible, learner-centered strategies outside of traditional classroom settings. The Toolbox is designed to provide evidence-based, innovative educational materials that promote inclusion and open-mindedness with an emphasis on intersectionality. This comprehensive educational Toolbox contains components of: audiovisual resources, creative literary tasks, artistic expression digital tools and performative activities.

Audiovisual resources, such as videos or interactive multimedia content offer a dynamic way to engage children. It is increasingly challenging to envision contemporary educational processes without the integration of diverse audiovisual resources because of their presence in students' daily lives. These materials enable children to explore complex topics in an accessible and engaging format that fosters a deeper understanding of content. Furthermore, the integration of such tools into educational practices can stimulate children's curiosity and encourage their active participation. Additionally, the effectiveness of a teaching process is not solely determined by the use of numerous innovative resources. The strategic application of audiovisual tools is essential in the teaching process – educators should possess the competence to adhere to the principles of their appropriate and effective use. This facilitates motivating children to embrace positive values and attitudes (Bušljeta 2013). Therefore, the Zoom Out project contains multiple workshops for teachers and pre-service teachers so they can gain the necessary knowledge. The content delivered through non-formal education is diverse and, whenever possible, tailored to meet the specific needs of participants (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska 2015). **The use of non-formal methods places a strong emphasis on adopting an individualized approach to learners.**

Creative literary activities which include storytelling and creative writing exercises, provide children with opportunities to express themselves and explore their imaginations. These activities encourage children's emotional and cognitive growth along with increasing their communication

skills. Engaging with literature enables children to connect with different perspectives. We consider that creative literary activities can encourage critical reflection on societal issues, making them a valuable resource for promoting critical thinking and social awareness.

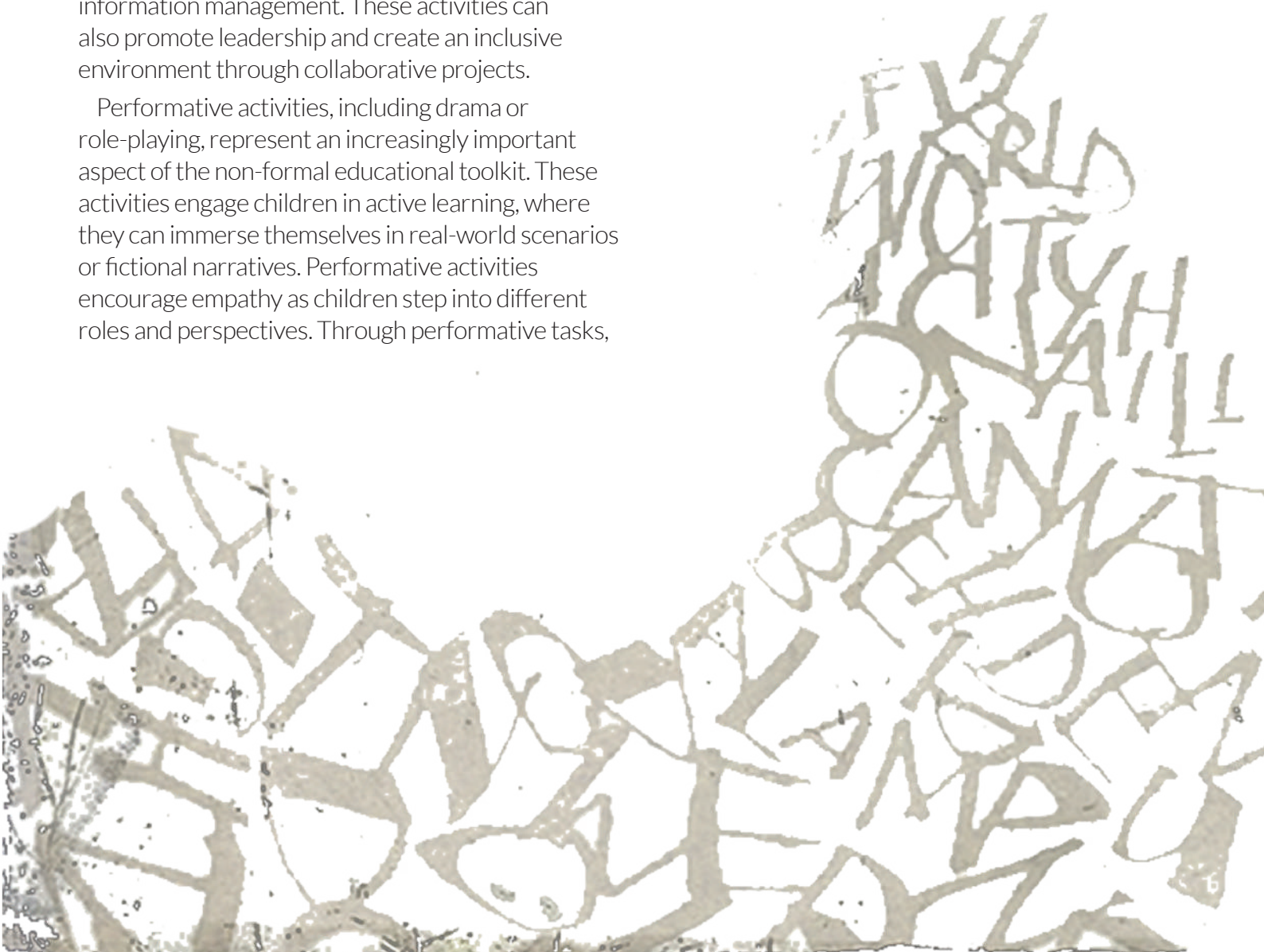
Artistic resources provide another way for children to engage with expressive manner. These activities foster creativity, problem-solving and collaboration, skills that are crucial in an intersectional perspective. We believe that creating and interpreting art enables children to develop a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity and individual expression. Moreover, promoting the integration of interdisciplinary approaches through art creates opportunities for children to explore and express themselves.

Digital tools consist of podcasts, animations and the potential of chat gpt which enable the development of competencies such as linguistic skills, problem-solving, communication, and information management. These activities can also promote leadership and create an inclusive environment through collaborative projects.

Performative activities, including drama or role-playing, represent an increasingly important aspect of the non-formal educational toolkit. These activities engage children in active learning, where they can immerse themselves in real-world scenarios or fictional narratives. Performative activities encourage empathy as children step into different roles and perspectives. Through performative tasks,

children gain confidence in expressing themselves which helps to develop emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. Moreover, in non-formal education, group-based work is the dominant approach. The relationships between participants (including the facilitator) are based on principles of partnership, free from hierarchy and competition. Participants' achievements are primarily assessed through self-evaluation, with criteria that can be collaboratively established by both the participants and the facilitator (Młynarczyk-Sokołowska 2015).

All of these resources included in the Zoom Out Toolbox create a multifaceted approach to learn in an intersectional perspective. Children can engage creativity, critical thinking and cross-cultural understanding by participating in audiovisual, literary, artistic, digital or performative activities.



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18

Exploring the World through Drama: Methods for Inclusive Education

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WHAT IS THE DRAMA METHOD?

As a blend of artistic and educational skills, **drama functions as a method of teaching that aims for the comprehensive, holistic, and harmonious development of an individual's personality.** The term “drama” comes from the Greek word “drao,” which translates to act, attempt, or do. According to Pankowska (1990), drama is founded on a fictitious, imaginative situation that emerges when several individuals collectively present something absent in the current moment, utilizing their bodies and voices as means of expression. The primary focus of drama is the individuality and distinctiveness of each person, as well as the unlocking and nurturing of their innate potential in thought, emotion, and imagination. The structures and techniques utilized within drama engage participants in a polyphonic manner, stimulating all personal qualities. **Central to drama is the idea that the richest engagement with educational content occurs through integrative experiences** that not only stimulate intellectual understanding but also evoke subjective emotions and actions. This approach elevates experience to an epistemological foundation for comprehension—a distinctive feature of drama-based education (Gołębniak & Teusz 1999).

Gadamer (1993) articulates that experience possesses a particular immediacy that defies any attempt to assign it definitive meaning. Each experience is personally encountered, and its significance is rooted in the unity of self, thereby containing an irreplaceable connection to the entirety of one's unique life. Drama taps into the natural and spontaneous expression inherent in every individual, as well as the human tendencies to mimic, empathize with others, and engage in playful scenarios. Furthermore, by merging the lines between fiction and reality in the interpretation of literary works, drama fosters creativity and artistic insight. It

inspires participants to engage in innovative and original endeavors while serving as a symbolic representation of life (Way 1990).

Beyond its artistic and expressive value, drama also serves as a powerful tool for fostering empathy and understanding diverse perspectives. By assuming different roles and immersing themselves in the experiences of fictional or historical characters, students gain insight into the lived realities of people from different social, cultural, or historical backgrounds. This engagement helps bridge the gap between self and other, encouraging a deeper emotional and intellectual connection to perspectives that might otherwise remain distant.

Drama serves to intertwine individual participation with the ability to work effectively within a group, establishing a critical platform for interpersonal communication and the exchange of ideas. Language acts as the medium through which this dialogue and understanding flow. As Jaspers (1990) points out, the meanings of words represent our concepts and perceptions, which relate to the existence of objects in the world. Yet, it is through the creation of words that these concepts and their corresponding realities become clear and distinct. Through drama, students refine and expand their language skills, engaging in activities that require them to name, describe, analyze, and evaluate various social, literary, or existential phenomena. This process allows them to arrive at their unique interpretations, effectively breathing life into the text's meaning (Gadamer 1993).

A key aspect of this approach is the promotion of language activities that foster free and creative expression, encouraging students to explore and articulate their values. The journey of discovering meanings within texts, integrating personal imagination with external realities, comprehending character motivations, and revitalizing the text all rely on language as a

sensory foundation for intellectual exploration. These elements function as instruments for recalling, retaining, articulating, and enhancing the knowledge and emotions acquired during engagement. Ricoeur (1985) noted that language is neither just a foundation nor merely an object; it serves as the medium and environment through which individuals establish themselves and the world is revealed.

By providing opportunities for adept and precise use of language, drama upholds the belief that our experience of the world emerges largely “from the depths of language” (Gadamer 1993).

As a pedagogical method designed to enhance linguistic communication, drama showcases the effectiveness of language and

promotes the exploration of its full spectrum of possibilities, inviting students to:

1. Narrate their past or current experiences,
2. Engage in structured logical reasoning.
3. Providing information, instruction, and clarification,
4. Engaging in discussions and mediating conflicts,
5. Strategizing, assessing the current situation, and making decisions,
6. Negotiating, facilitating communication, and drawing conclusions.

The overarching aim of drama is to aid individuals in gaining a deeper understanding of themselves and the world in which they live. By presenting alternative perspectives that challenge their current viewpoints, drama fosters reflective thinking, enhances self-awareness, enriches emotional experiences, and broadens educational opportunities to include cognitive and emotional insights derived from imagined scenarios and hypothetical situations. Each participant engages not only with the observable reality but also with a broader model of actions and feelings that is intuitively recognized. This nuanced understanding of truth transcends

time, connecting our experiential existence to a universal continuum of knowledge. A pivotal aspect of using drama as a teaching method is the focus on experience. Experience is an integral component of life that always emerges from individual



perception. Its significance lies in its capacity to maintain its impact until it is altered or fundamentally rejected due to new experiences. Experience embodies an inherent openness to novelty; it does not simply correct prior misconceptions but necessitates ongoing validation, and without such affirmation, it transforms into something different (Gadamer 1993).

OBJECTIVES OF DRAMA

Drama activities are designed to facilitate well-rounded and consistent personal growth, taking on various engaging forms and styles. These activities must center on achieving key developmental goals. By focusing on these developmental goals—creative expression, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, collaboration, cultural awareness, confidence building, problem solving, and communication skills—drama activities not only facilitate individual growth but also prepare participants to navigate complex social landscapes effectively. One primary focus is to nurture creative thinking and proactive behavior, encouraging participants to explore their imagination, emotions, and sensitivities. By fostering an environment where emotional engagement and intuition harmonize with intellectual and analytical processes, drama helps individuals strengthen their understanding of social, ethical, and aesthetic values. Furthermore, it lays the groundwork for appreciating various forms of diversity—including cultural, social, and individual differences—thereby encouraging participants to evaluate and reconsider their personal experiences and traditions. By exposing individuals to a broad spectrum of perspectives, drama fosters an environment where diverse voices are heard and valued. This process not only cultivates empathy and understanding but also challenges participants to reflect on their own biases and assumptions. Engaging with diverse narratives in drama enriches the participants' awareness of societal complexities and enables them to navigate and honor differences in a more informed and respectful manner. Through the comprehension and practice of drama, individuals can develop deeper insights

into themselves and the world around them, leading to improved self-awareness, accurate self-assessment, and increased confidence in their capabilities. A vital aspect of drama is the enhancement of expressive abilities, particularly through body language, which facilitates the exploration and development of personal ideas and initiatives. Drama also enhances interpersonal communication by engaging participants in processes of representation, where they learn to use linguistic, visual, and spatial symbols to convey meaning. These symbols serve as tools for expression, allowing individuals to articulate their thoughts and feelings more effectively. Moreover, engaging with these symbols encourages participants to consider how meaning is crafted and perceived differently based on cultural and individual contexts. Additionally, collaborative experiences in group projects cultivate a sense of community and social awareness. As participants work together, they begin to understand the connection between their self-image and their perceptions of others, recognizing that communication plays a crucial role in shaping social interactions and relationships. Drama additionally provides insights into the use of theatrical elements across various educational contexts, stimulating creative responses to diverse stimuli. Participants engage in mature and critical analysis as they learn to evaluate their own work alongside that of their peers, fostering a culture of constructive feedback and self-reflection. This evaluative process is crucial, as it helps individuals recognize strengths and areas for improvement, deepening their efforts in creating personal presentations. Moreover, as participants immerse themselves in different characters and narratives, they encounter various realities that may be outside their own experiences. This exposure enriches their vocabulary, allowing them



to articulate complex ideas and emotions that reflect these diverse perspectives. The language acquired through dialogues, discussions, and planned scenarios not only enhances their overall language culture but also fosters empathy and understanding for situations and viewpoints they may not have previously considered. Drama also equips participants with essential problem-solving skills, enabling them to tackle challenges and navigate conflicts through creative compromises. By offering new perspectives, drama broadens participants' thinking, pushing them beyond their existing knowledge and understanding. As individuals explore and differentiate complex emotions within a supportive environment, they are better equipped to recognize and engage with positive feelings while addressing negative ones.

This process lays the foundation for authentic self-presentation, as participants engage in role-play and character exploration, which encourages them to connect with their own spiritual and psychological needs in a supportive setting. The collaborative nature of drama allows individuals to experiment with different facets of their identity, leading to greater self-acceptance and a deeper understanding of their personal narratives.

Moreover, the development of both teachers and students is emphasized through shared discoveries that foster mutual learning. In this dynamic, the purpose of the drama serves as a guiding force, aligning the teacher's objectives with the overall structure of the sessions. This alignment ensures that the exploration of personal identity is integral to the learning process.

Flexibility in approach allows for the adaptation of lessons as they unfold, incorporating student input and ideas while consistently aiming to achieve established goals in a coherent manner. By engaging in this fluid, interactive process, participants are empowered to express themselves more authentically, cultivating a richer experience that transcends traditional educational boundaries (Gołębniak & Teusz 1999).

DRAMA TECHNIQUES: APPROACHING ENGAGEMENT

Achieving specific objectives within drama involves a multitude of diverse techniques and methods. The selection of one or several approaches should be guided by an understanding of the intended purpose and the potential outcomes these methods can achieve. At the core of drama lies the concept of roles. 'Playing a role' involves immersing oneself in imaginative scenarios, exploring what it means to embody a particular character. As noted by B. Way (Warszawa 1990), such experiential learning has long been recognized in educational settings as essential for personal and cultural growth. However, drama uniquely allows participants to engage their whole selves in a way few other activities can replicate. Engaging with a character means not merely portraying them but truly becoming them, to feel and act as they would. This identification arises from envisioning oneself in the character's circumstances, leading to profound insights into one's identity and the nature of others. **Inhabiting a role encompasses three levels of meaning: the personal level draws from the participant's own experiences, such as feeling pain as an individual. The fictional level emerges from hypothetical contexts, like suffering as a patient in a hospital during a war. The symbolic level generalizes that experience, illustrating the universal nature of human suffering.** To effectively engage in a role, participants must commit firmly, establishing suitable relationships with others, nurturing personal motivation, and employing appropriate language and behaviors. Each role invites exploration of both external traits and internal drivers. This simulation of real-world scenarios provides a platform to experiment with new behaviors, range of emotions, and motivations behind decisions. Facilitators prepare participants by elucidating the roles' meanings while prompting observers to engage thoughtfully. Dialogue plays a defining role in drama, embodying the experience

of “being in role.” Through conversation, discussions arise that frequently involve conflict—whether ideological, persuasive, or based on belief systems. Such conflicts can surface overtly or subtly, stemming from external influences or internal emotions. Encouraging dialogue in pairs, small groups, or larger classroom settings doubles as valuable linguistic practice, honing the ability to navigate the relationship between actions and language.

The interview technique conducts structured dialogues between individuals or groups, where participants could either remain “in role” or step outside of it. This distinction can considerably shape the tone and outcomes of the conversation. Pantomime is another expressive technique that relies on body language, gestures, and movements, often involving imaginary objects. Participants are encouraged to act spontaneously, and instructors focus on the emotional depth and intellectual quality emerging from these expressions rather than striving for technical precision. Teachers can either initiate pantomime exercises or observe from the sidelines.

Improvisation thrives on spontaneous creation, allowing participants to develop dialogues and actions in real time. This form may exist solely in dialogue or incorporate physical action using props or mime. Clarity and expressiveness are vital, with key elements highlighted during enactment. Group dynamics may vary widely, including work in pairs, larger teams, or full-class participation. After an improvisational session, teachers can facilitate reflection through guided questions to extract insights from the experience. In contrast to free improvisational work, improvised scenes follow a systematic approach, delineating phases in the narrative—introduction, climax, and resolution.

Improvised performances can draw from storytelling or literary texts provided by the instructor, offering various ways for students to engage with drama activities. For instance, they may reinterpret the beginning of a book, alter its ending, or merge characters from different stories to create new narratives. This approach fosters creativity and analytical thinking, encouraging

students to explore character motivations and thematic connections across texts. Additionally, drama-based methods allow for exercises tailored to the literary characters being studied, enabling students to step into their roles and experience their emotions, dilemmas, and perspectives firsthand. The teacher may assume an observational role, occasionally providing commentary to enrich the learning experience. Reflective evaluations serve to enhance subsequent performances.

Dramatic staging leans towards a theatrical form, establishing a clear distinction between actors and audience. However, it can also blur this line by engaging viewers directly. Involvement in staging encompasses rehearsals and exercises built around a specific script, allowing students to collaborate under a leader's guidance. Groups experiment with various interpretations, creating scenes, developing characters, designing costumes, and planning choreography and scenery (Gołębniak & Teusz 1999).

Additionally, various Toolbox activities, developed as part of the Zoom Out project, incorporate drama-based methodologies. The Toolbox includes exercises that feature elements of drama, such as role-playing which encourage participants to engage in creative expression and critical thinking. Even activities that do not initially involve drama—such as debates, reflective discussions, or creative writing—can be adapted to incorporate dramatic elements, making learning more immersive and participatory.

Overall, **drama not only enhances critical thinking but also ignites a passion for literature**, making it more engaging and relevant for students. By applying these techniques, educators can create a dynamic learning environment that encourages students to think critically and develop a lifelong interest in reading and interpreting literature.

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THE TRUNCHBULL IS SHOT OUT THE WINDOW: THE EXPERIENCES OF THE SCHOOLS

The time for humiliating, abusing, and threatening students with being locked in a cupboard full of spikes is over. Matilda, with the power of her mind, writes on the chalkboard the words that will make Miss Trunchbull tremble, causing her to run away in fear. And with her, all the fear and oppression in the school is shot out the window, making way for a new chapter. A chapter where children can learn not only the lessons of the classroom but also values that will help them grow in an environment of respect, safety, and freedom.

This section introduces the participating schools in the project, which share their experiences of working with children's literature and inequalities. Each one, from its unique perspective and methodology, offers a distinctive view on how they approach the challenge of transforming classrooms into spaces of justice, understanding, and social change.

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To See the World through Different Lenses

Mireia Escobar Pérez & Ana García García (La Sínia)

The creation of a new educational center in the city of Vic arose from the need to include children from the Remei neighborhood in the CEIP Montseny at the beginning of the 21st century. Geographically, the Montseny neighborhood has always been displaced from the rest of the city, since it is located on the other side of the train track. Despite burying the train track, the Montseny neighborhood is on the other side of the ring road that was built.

Once the work on the new buildings was completed, during July 2007, the CEIP Montseny was transferred to the new building of the CEIP de Vic. Thus, in the 2007-2008 academic year, the CEIP de Vic merged with the CEIP Montseny, becoming Escola La Sínia.

La Sínia is a public school categorized as a Center of Maximum Complexity. This complexity is defined by the percentage of students who present Educational Needs for Educational Support (NESE) and/or Special Educational Needs (NEE). Since the school was created in 2008, this percentage of students has fluctuated between 70% and 80%, mostly, due to socioeconomic difficulties in the family.

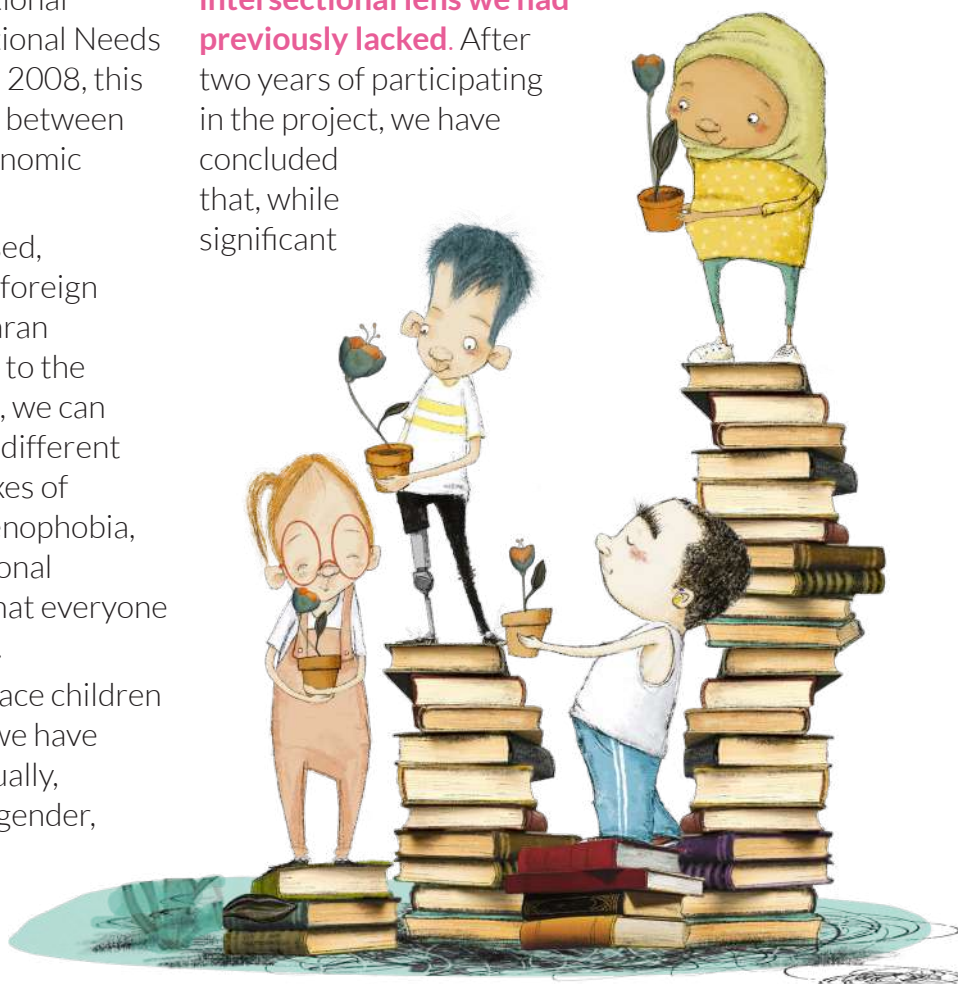
The school's student body is composed, 72% of them, of families from non-EU foreign backgrounds, primarily from Sub-Saharan countries, India, and Morocco. Thanks to the different backgrounds of the students, we can say that the school currently hosts 22 different languages. For this reason, the main axes of inequality we encounter are racism/xenophobia, gender inequality, classism, and functional diversity; in addition to the diversity that everyone has as a unique individual in the world.

As an inclusive school that aims to place children at the center of the learning process, we have always strived to treat all students equally, without making distinctions based on gender, culture, beliefs, or other factors.

However, after receiving training and joining the Zoom Out project, we realized that in our daily practice, we were overlooking many of the axes of social inequality our students experience.

In other words, 100% of the school's teaching staff were born in Catalonia, have Catalan as their mother tongue, do not experience obvious physical nor intellectual disabilities, are white, have stable employment... However, despite being traversed by all axes of inequality, at times, we were not aware of our position in relation to those axes that provided us privileges. As a result, we do not experience society through the same lens as many of our students and families, and we often take our privileges for granted.

Thanks to the training, the school's team has begun to shift its perspective on students and families, adopting the intersectional lens we had previously lacked. After two years of participating in the project, we have concluded that, while significant



progress has been made, there is still much work to do, particularly in addressing and dismantling our own biases.

We need to deconstruct ourselves to rebuild with the understanding that the world is experienced through many different lenses and that while we hold many privileges, those around us may experience life from a position of oppression. We must take into account how relevant is the context, too. Depending on the context, a situation is perceived as disadvantageous when one holds a position of inequality relative to an established axis or parameter. However, the same fact, in another context, can transform into an advantage.

One of the key objectives regarding children's literature at La Sínia is to foster children's interest in books and reading, both as a source of

information and for the sheer enjoyment of reading.

Thus, the cycle-specific libraries take on greater importance compared to the shared library space, intending to make them more accessible to children. The materials in each library are tailored to their age group, enriched, and more focused on children's interests according to their age and the themes they enjoy.

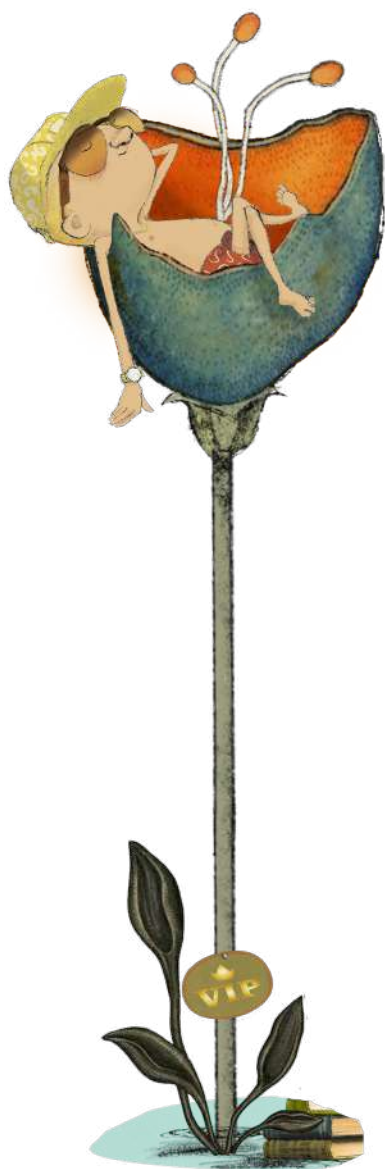
At our school, even before starting training on children's literature from an intersectional perspective, we were already working to ensure that the literature we read reflected the cultural and gender diversity of our educational community. The selected books included voices from different cultural backgrounds and geographical origins, aiming to promote equitable representation and give visibility to often marginalized stories.

This approach allowed us to address topics such as gender equality and inclusion, fostering enriching dialogue among students. The goal was not only to broaden horizons, but also to recognize and value the plurality present in our classrooms. However, it was only when we began the workshops with teachers that we truly embraced an intersectional perspective, considering various axes of inequality beyond cultural and gender diversity.

Through the workshops we have conducted with our students, we have observed that children have become aware of a significant reality: many do not feel adequately represented in the stories they read. This discovery has created a space for collective reflection, where children have expressed the need to find stories that more closely reflect their own experiences and identities.

This newfound awareness has not only been enriching but also encourages us to rethink the literary tools and materials we provide to our students.

The collection in these libraries includes various literary genres and reflects the linguistic diversity of the school. They are equipped with stories and books in Catalan, Spanish, English, and



the student's native languages such as Arabic, Egyptian, Mandarin Chinese, Bengali, Urdu, Yoruba, Igbo, Hindi, Akan (Twi) among others. Books in non-curricular languages are donations made by families to the school, as we want the students to feel represented. For this reason, when they travel to their countries of origin, they often gift us books written in their native language. On the other hand, we also organize visits from the families so they can tell stories in their mother tongue and then translate them into one of the curricular languages, so that everyone can enjoy the story and learn about the language and culture of other countries around the world.

Children's literature has great potential to combat inequalities in schools, as it can serve as a powerful tool to highlight diversity and promote inclusion. Through stories and tales, different identities, cultures, family realities, and experiences—often underrepresented in

traditional materials—can be showcased. This allows children to see themselves reflected and recognized, boosting their self-esteem, while also helping others to understand and respect diverse perspectives.

Moreover, children's literature facilitates dialogue on topics such as racism, sexism, classism, and other axes of inequality, creating spaces for collective reflection. When an inclusive and intersectional literary collection is consciously curated, it not only enriches learning but also helps dismantle biases and foster values like empathy and equality.

In short, children's literature, when approached with a critical and transformative perspective, can become a key tool for educating about diversity and building a more equitable and inclusive school environment.



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A Safe Space for Discussing Difficult Topics

Natalia Kurlanc-Kościelna & Agnieszka Szarek (KNSP Biadacz)

Komplementarna Niepubliczna Szkoła Podstawowa (KNSP) is a private school which was established in 2018 and has quickly become a vital part of the local community in the Opolskie region. It's located in the quiet village of Biadacz in Kluczbork commune. The school is known for its personalized education and strong academic performance. It has eight classes, each designed to provide a supportive learning environment. With a low student-to-teacher ratio, students receive the individual attention they need to succeed both academically and personally. The school is close to the city of Kluczbork, making it easily accessible for families in the surrounding areas. The rural setting offers a peaceful learning environment, free from urban distractions, while still being close to city amenities. Students come from various places in the region, with some traveling up to 30 kilometers to attend. The school values inclusivity, curiosity, and academic excellence. It follows a Montessori-based approach, which emphasizes hands-on, self-directed learning and critical thinking. It also integrates Catholic values, promoting a moral and ethical framework grounded in faith, compassion, and community service. The school aims to help students reach their full potential and become confident, well-rounded individuals ready to contribute positively to society. Through the integration of innovative pedagogical approaches and a holistic development framework, the institution prepares students to become respectful and compassionate members of the global community.

INEQUALITIES IN OUR SCHOOL

Our school community is dedicated to fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for all students. However, several inequalities persist, affecting students' daily lives. These inequalities include disabilities such as autism, Asperger's syndrome, and intellectual disabilities, as well as differences in age, gender,

and religion. Understanding and addressing these disparities is essential to ensure every student has the opportunity to succeed.

- Students with disabilities such as autism, Asperger's syndrome, and intellectual disabilities face unique challenges that can affect their daily school experience:
- Students with autism or Asperger's syndrome sometimes struggle with social interactions, making it difficult to form friendships and engage with colleagues. This can lead to feelings of isolation and exclusion.
- Intellectual disabilities often result in learning difficulties that require specialized teaching methods and additional support. These students usually need more time to grasp concepts and benefit from individualized attention.
- Many students with autism or Asperger's syndrome are sensitive to sensory stimuli like loud noises and bright lights, making typical school environments overwhelming and stressful.
- Students with these disabilities often also have difficulty managing stress, anxiety, or frustration, impacting their behavior and interactions with others.

In addition to disabilities, inequalities related to age, gender, and religion also impact students' daily lives:

- Students of different ages face challenges in terms of maturity, social skills, and academic readiness. Younger students sometimes



struggle to keep up with older peers, leading to feelings of inadequacy or exclusion. Above challenges are especially visible in mixed groups while doing workshops (e.g. Christmas workshops, Earth Day workshops).

- Stereotypes and biases based on gender can sometime affect students' self-esteem, participation in activities, and academic performance. Girls and boys face different expectations, limiting their opportunities and growth.
- Students from diverse religious backgrounds experience challenges in finding acceptance and understanding from their colleagues and teachers. This can lead to feelings of isolation and discomfort in expressing their beliefs. Most of students in our school have catholic backgrounds, only few children, mainly coming from Ukraine would be different beliefs.

ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES IN OUR SCHOOL

To support all students and address these inequalities, our school has implemented several initiatives:

- Providing teachers with training on supporting students with disabilities, as well as fostering an inclusive environment for all students, helps create a more understanding and accommodating school culture. Meetings with teachers and parents to establish the best possible environment for students with difficulties are also implemented.
- Developing customized education plans for students with disabilities ensures they receive the necessary support and resources to succeed academically. Supporting teachers are present during the most challenging tasks for students.
- Encouraging colleagues mentoring and buddy systems helps students build meaningful relationships and feel more connected to the school community. School provides

regular workshops with school psychologist and school counsellor to promote good relations between students and teaching staff.

- Creating sensory-friendly environments, such as quiet corner and sensory friendly rooms, provides students with a safe and calming space to retreat to when they feel overwhelmed.
- Organizing inclusive and accessible activities that promotes a sense of belonging and community among all students, regardless of age, sex, or religion. In the past our school has taken part in following activities:
 - Foreign languages day - days where students showcase traditions, music, and cuisine from their backgrounds or their chosen country. Students invite guests who speak about their countries and culture. Such events celebrate diversity and create a space for mutual learning and respect.
 - Team-based challenges - activities like treasure hunts, escape rooms, or problem-solving games are organized in our school quite often. Such activities build collaboration and teamwork across diverse groups. Challenges are adapted for all abilities.
 - Sports day - all students are included in popular sports regardless of their abilities. It's a fun way to encourage teamwork and fitness.
 - Community projects - students are taking parts in different volunteering activities, like cleaning up a local park on Earth Day, creating care packages for Christmas for elderly people or packages with food for animal shelters. Working for a shared cause strengthens bonds and instills a sense of purpose.

THE ROLE OF CHILDRENS' LITERATURE IN THE SCHOOL

Children's literature plays a crucial role in our school's educational approach. In addition to the required reading included in the curriculum,



our teachers carefully select books that address specific inequalities relevant to each class. Since we are a small school with a close-knit, family-like atmosphere, we know our students well and can tailor book choices to their needs and experiences.

Books are read together in class, fostering discussion and reflection. Additionally, students have dedicated “silent reading” sessions once a week, where they can choose books that interest them. Our school library is easily accessible to everyone—books are placed on shelves in the hallway, so students can reach for them at any time. This encourages reading as a natural part of their daily routine and allows them to explore different perspectives through literature.

THE POTENTIAL OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE TO ADDRESS INEQUALITIES

Children's literature has the power to promote empathy, understanding, and inclusion. It allows students to see the world from different perspectives and recognize the challenges faced by others. In our school, literature is particularly useful in addressing inequalities related to disabilities, cultural differences, gender, and physical appearance.

Books featuring diverse characters and stories help students understand that everyone is unique and valuable. They also challenge stereotypes and misconceptions, encouraging respect and acceptance. By reading about characters who experience discrimination or social

difficulties, children can relate to these struggles, reflect on their own attitudes, and develop more inclusive behaviors. Literature provides a safe space for discussing difficult topics, helping students express their thoughts and emotions.

ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES THROUGH WONDER

One of the books we use to address inequalities is *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio. This novel tells the story of Auggie, a boy with a facial difference who faces bullying and exclusion at school. The book is a powerful tool for teaching empathy and kindness.

Through Auggie's journey, students learn about the challenges faced by children with visible disabilities and the importance of treating others with respect. The novel also highlights different perspectives, showing how Auggie's family, friends, and even classmates struggle with their own feelings and biases. This encourages students to think about their own actions and how they can contribute to a more inclusive environment.

After reading *Wonder*, our students engage in discussions about acceptance, kindness, and how they can support their peers who may feel different or excluded. The book helps create an open dialogue about bullying, social pressure, and the impact of small acts of kindness.

By integrating books like *Wonder* into our curriculum, we ensure that students not only learn about inequalities but also develop the emotional intelligence needed to create a more inclusive and supportive school community.



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Capturing deeper meanings and nuances in children's books

Bernarda Klarić, Daniela Crnković, Marina Fistanić & Simona Jurjević (Škola Josip Pupačić)

Our school is located in an urban area, but it also includes students from different socio-economic backgrounds, which creates a specific context in which various types of inequalities are present. Some of our students come from marginalized groups, including lower-income families, ethnic minority communities and migrant children. Although there are not many such students in our school, these inequalities are manifested in access to education, material resources and learning support. Inequality is also reflected in language barriers for children whose mother tongue is not the language of instruction. In addition, gender differences and stereotypes about students' abilities and interests sometimes affect their success and participation in certain activities.

Talking about topics like inequality, poverty, discrimination, and tolerance with children in school is extremely important for several reasons:

- **Developing empathy:** Children learn to understand and empathize with others who are in different situations. This helps them become more sensitive and caring towards the people around them.
- **Reducing prejudice:** Talking about discrimination and inequality helps children recognize and reject prejudices they may have towards others because of their differences.
- **Promoting tolerance:** Learning about tolerance helps children accept and respect differences, whether it be culture, religion, race, or any other characteristic.
- **Developing critical thinking:** Discussions about these topics encourage children to think about and analyze social problems, which contributes to their critical thinking and ability to make informed decisions.
- **Preparing for the future:** Understanding these topics prepares children for life in a diverse and globalized world, where they will encounter people from different backgrounds

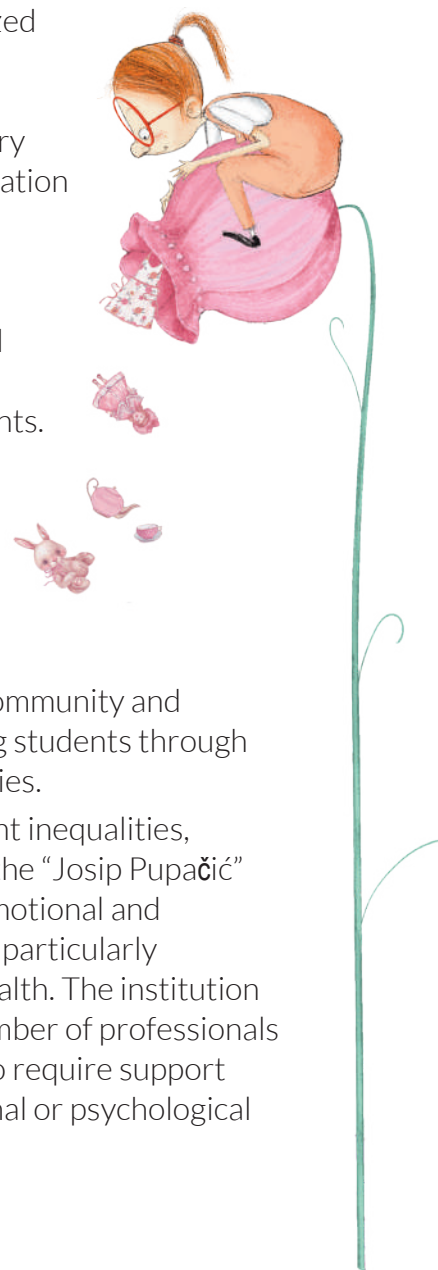
and with different experiences.

- **Empowering children:** When children understand social injustices, they can feel empowered to act against them, whether through volunteering, advocacy, or simply through everyday interactions.

It is important to emphasize that schools are important places where change for the better can happen. Teachers are an important link in raising awareness and changing patterns that harm everyone, both girls and boys (Srednja.hr, n.d.).

In order to reduce the impact of inequality, we develop inclusive practices that include an individualized approach to learning, additional support through supplementary activities and collaboration with parents. We organize workshops aimed at developing intercultural skills and raising awareness of equality among students. Teachers regularly participate in professional development related to inclusive pedagogy. We also work to strengthen community and mutual respect among students through extracurricular activities.

Among the significant inequalities, affecting students at the "Josip Pupačić" Primary School are emotional and psychological factors, particularly concerning mental health. The institution lacks an adequate number of professionals to assist students who require support in addressing emotional or psychological



challenges. Consequently, these students often experience considerable stress and a decline in their academic performance. Additionally, exceptional instances of peer bullying disrupt the harmonious functioning of the school environment.

Ensuring equal educational opportunities to students with special needs is challenging due to limited resources and staff. Economic disparities are also evident, as students from more affluent backgrounds tend to dominate their peer groups. Although school personnel strive to be accessible to their students, preventive programs against bullying such as the Alphabet of Prevention are implemented within community classes. This program provides structured preventive activities for both students and parents, aimed at fostering social skills and interpersonal relationships.

The Alphabet of Prevention encourages the development of self-esteem and a positive self-image, the development of collaborative social skills, and the development of non-violent conflict resolution skills (Os-ilribar-labin. skole.hr, n.d.).

At the institutional level, UNICEF's bullying prevention initiative and Lions

Quest - Skills for

Adolescence—designed to help students cultivate social skills and emotional intelligence—are also executed with the support of UNODC and the Ministry of Science and Education. The program is among the six most successful scientifically evaluated social-emotional learning programs in the world, and is intended for students aged 10 to 14 (Azoo.hr, n.d.).

The school implements various educational programs and initiatives aimed at improving understanding of the concepts of equality and social justice, and activities and workshops

that integrate literature with discussions of inequality, helping students connect literary themes to real-world issues. Literature is used as a lens to explore broader societal challenges, such as economic disparities, religious differences, and social justice. Teachers play a key role in these conversations, using literature and other educational tools to bring these important topics closer to children in a way that is understandable and relevant to their age.

Participation in the Erasmus + Zoom Out project, we directly participate with other European institutions in the development of contemporary pedagogical approaches that address the topics of equality and non-discrimination in education.

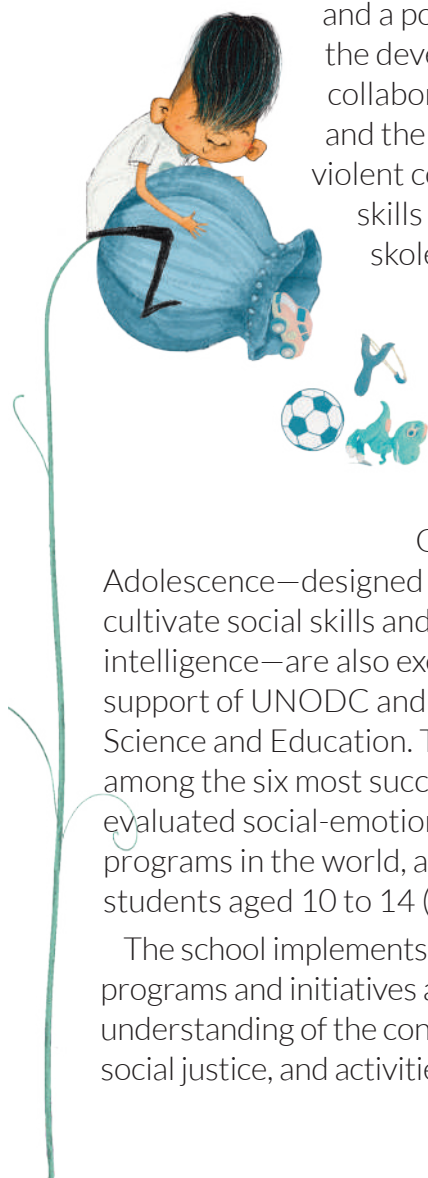
CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Reading is one of the fundamental prerequisites of cultural competence; it is believed that it is the only thing that can free a person from narrow-mindedness, ignorance and prejudice, free him from fear of historical and cultural differences and enable him to learn about the humanity that is common to all (Enciklopedija.hr, n.d.).

Children's literature not only educates a child, but also shapes them. By reading, a child learns, explores, has fun, enriches their inner world and gains new experiences. From simple, object-based picture books to structured poems and novels for young adults, children's literature comes in many forms, styles, and themes – to the delight of readers of all ages (NasaMalaknjiznica.hr, n.d.).

Children's literature occupies an important place in the education of our students, because it does not only encourage a love of for reading, but also serves as a tool for developing empathy, critical thinking and understanding of diversity.

Teachers at our school use children's literature in their classes to stimulate discussions about important social topics, including inequalities, tolerance and human rights. Through literature, students are introduced to different perspectives and life situations, which encourages them to reflect on their own and other people's experiences.



Stories often carry moral or educational messages that children can learn from reading, with a wide range of themes reflecting life situations, friendship, family, diversity, and the importance of sharing. Therefore, children's literature not only shapes children's minds and experiences, but often leaves a lasting impression on adult readers as well (NasaMalaknjiznica.hr, n.d.).

Children are capable of capturing deeper meanings and nuances that can be critically analyzed within children's literary works, which we adults sometimes fail to pay attention to (NasaMalaknjiznica.hr, n.d.).

From the first grade, our school students are retold and read shorter epic works from national and world folk and artistic literature. Thus, in Mate Lovrak's children's novel, "Vlak u snijegu", students analyze the economic situation and gender inequality of the characters, which is reflected in the actions of the main characters of this literary work. For example, through the story "The Ugly Duckling" by Hans Christian Andersen, students learn about discrimination and accepting diversity. The story "The Little Match Girl" by the same author is used to discuss poverty and empathy for others; "The Little Prince" by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, can be used to discuss friendship, love, and understanding others; "Matilda" by Roald Dahl, which addresses themes of injustice, education, and the power of the individual.

By the age of eleven, in order to achieve higher levels of reading skills, reading for pleasure is developed through folk interpretations of fairy tales and stories by teachers. From the age of ten, students increasingly read assigned or optional literary works independently, sharing their experience of the works read, and participating together with the teacher in the analysis of literary works.

Through children's literature, we strive to raise students' awareness of social problems, including the inequalities faced by themselves and their peers. We use books that address the topics of poverty, migration, gender equality, or discrimination as a starting point for discussions and projects. We strive to integrate literature into classes in a way that allows students to recognize

the connection between literary characters and real life.

Through Croatian language classes and projects related to encouraging reading, literary works that speak about social and societal injustice, diversity, and finding identity are discussed in our school.

Another instance of these practices is a students' at a book club, where they discussed Jason Reynolds' novel, *Ghost*. The novel includes characters from various cultural, ethnic, and social backgrounds. The diversity of the characters allows for the creation of a community that supports each other despite differences and develops empathy in readers towards people of lower socioeconomic status. The novel tells the story of a boy, Castle Cranshaw, known as Ghost, who, after experiencing violence in his family home, runs away to the shelter of a running team. At school, the poor Ghost faces prejudice, a group of boys mocks him because of his family situation and worn-out clothes, but over time, Ghost takes the right stance towards his unenviable situation, which is an indicator of overcoming prejudice and creating resilience. The central theme of the novel is self-acceptance. The novel explores the theme of identity, and at the same time teaches us that we can overcome difficult life circumstances with the help of our own courage and the help of the community.

As part of the Erasmus+ Zoom out project, Ida Mlakar Črnič's picture book, *Close to Here*, was read to first graders. After the reading, a workshop entitled "Princess or an Ordinary Girl" was held, with eleven different activities that dealt with the themes of alienation, poverty, social isolation, inequality... The picture book depicts the life of a girl who does not even have a name, about whom social, cultural and religious diversity is hinted at, her everyday life, by months, and isolation from class and community life.

For fifth grade students, within the Erasmus+ Zoom out project, a workshop entitled "Dorcas and I" was held, based on the novel *Drugačija* by Ivana Guljašević Kuman. The novel deals with the theme of inclusivity through the story of a young black woman, Dorcas. Dorcas was born in Congo and adopted by parents from a small town in Croatia.

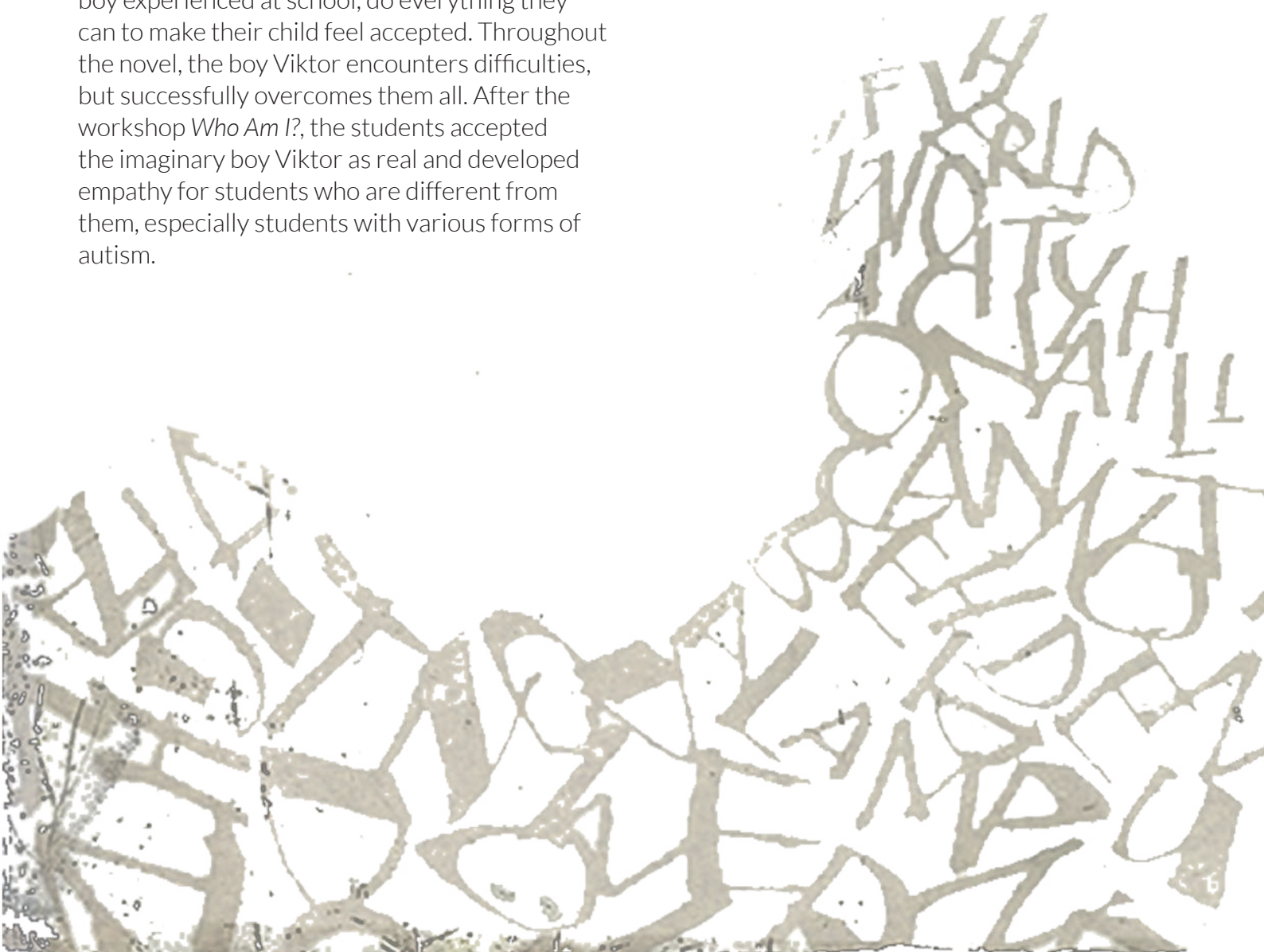
Throughout the novel, Dorcas faces prejudice because of her skin color and origin. The divorce of her Croatian parents further diminishes her sense of belonging and recognition of her own identity. However, this is still a warm story about finding her place under the sun. The novel develops in the young reader a sense of tolerance and empathy for those who are different in some way.

Sixth grade students were introduced to the novel *The Angel of the Plush Toys* by Nada Mihaljević. The novel won the prestigious Croatian “Grigor Vitez” award for best children’s book in 2013. The main character in the novel is Viktor, who moved with his parents from Zagreb to the village of Kraljev Vrh. While reading the novel, we learn that the protagonist of this novel is autistic and has savant syndrome (the ability to calculate quickly and accurately and possess a unique arithmetic ability). The parents, already faced with the prejudices and difficulties that the boy experienced at school, do everything they can to make their child feel accepted. Throughout the novel, the boy Viktor encounters difficulties, but successfully overcomes them all. After the workshop *Who Am I?*, the students accepted the imaginary boy Viktor as real and developed empathy for students who are different from them, especially students with various forms of autism.

Through literary characters from different social positions, children gain new experiences that develop tolerance, empathy, and break down prejudices, as well as a sense of acceptance and a bright future in situations of identification with some of the literary characters.

We believe that teachers in our school can encourage students to talk about diversity through children’s literature and develop awareness of the importance of accepting all students, thus combating social exclusion.

We have worked and are working to ensure that every child grows up happily, finds their place in this world, with the full support of family, friends, and society as a whole.



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A Tool to Enrich our Community and Foster a Critical and Reflective Spirit

Teresa Denis, Andrea Pérez, Judith Tamayo & Jèssica Balcells (Escola Joan Miró)

Joan Miró School is a public preschool and primary school (two classes per year) that has been operating since 1986. It is located in Barcelona, at the corner of Entença and Diputació streets, between the neighborhoods of Esquerra de l'Eixample and Sant Antoni, in a dynamic and diverse urban area.

The students primarily come from the Nova Esquerra de l'Eixample neighborhood, although a minority of students come from Sant Antoni and nearby areas of Sants-Montjuïc. Most families are local, but in recent years there has been an increase in families of other nationalities, reflecting Barcelona's evolving demographics. On the other hand, a small group of students belong to families supported by Social Services or from communities at risk of social exclusion.

Currently, **the main inequality perceived in the school is cultural, particularly in aspects such as language barriers and the lack of shared cultural references among students. These differences can sometimes hinder full participation and create situations where some children and families feel invisible.** The

school actively works to break these barriers by fostering dialogue spaces and activities that promote diversity. Ensuring that all families and children feel fully integrated and engaged in the school community remains an ongoing challenge.

This cultural, linguistic, and

socioeconomic diversity is seen as a strength that enriches the school community. As such, the school is committed to providing inclusive education (especially as a SIEI school: Intensive Support for Inclusive Education), ensuring that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, are supported and valued. This commitment is rooted in the values of democratic, pacifist, and co-educational principles, which form the foundation of the school's educational project.

In recent years, the teaching staff has participated in annual training sessions focused on addressing gender, cultural, and functional diversity inequalities. Additionally, last year, the school introduced specific training in restorative circles, a tool that has enabled the team to work on various aspects of diversity through reflective and participatory dialogue (see chapter 14).

At the same time, the school has established a Coexistence Committee, composed of representatives from both the teaching staff and families, with the aim of addressing issues related to inequalities and fostering a fairer and more inclusive school community. This committee meets two to three times a year to follow up and propose concrete actions.

Moreover, the school celebrates the Day of Nonviolence and Peace every year on January 30th. During this day, students engage in discussions about inequalities in the world. Each year, a specific theme is chosen, which is then explored and reflected upon in the



classrooms, with the goal of raising awareness and promoting values of peace and solidarity.

Children's literature has always been a fundamental element of work in all classrooms, from preschool to the final years of primary school. However, as students grow older, opportunities to create spaces for storytelling and literary debate tend to diminish. It is often assumed that at these ages, children develop these skills independently.

We believe it is essential to rethink how literature is shared with students in our school.

Moments must be created to highlight critical thinking, shared reflection, and, above all, the joy of reading. We are committed to making literature a vibrant and dynamic tool that continues to enrich the educational experience of all students, regardless of their age.

Our weekly schedule includes a dedicated hour for restorative circles. During this time, students gather in a circle, following clear rules, including the use of a talking piece and respecting the established phases of the circle. They discuss topics that concern them or reflect on inequalities present at the time. Illustrated books are often used as a starting point for these conversations, which then lead to collective reflections on the themes and inequalities highlighted in the readings.

However, we have noticed that traditional tales have been left behind on classroom bookshelves or, in some cases, forgotten entirely. After participating in this Erasmus+ project, the teaching team has decided it is time to recover these classics and tell them in a detailed and reflective manner. By using them as a basis for critical debate and comparing them with contemporary society, we can observe the progress made as a community, particularly in understanding intersectionality and social, cultural, age, and gender differences. This perspective helps us recognize the advances society has achieved and raises awareness among students about the importance of continuing to work toward a fairer and more inclusive society.

The potential of books to face inequalities is enormous. As a school, we strongly believe that books should be used as a tool to enrich our community and foster a critical and reflective spirit in students. Books allow us to step into the shoes of characters, identify with their experiences or situations, and become aware of our own actions. Furthermore, they are a powerful medium for fostering understanding, promoting empathy, and awakening deep and inexplicable emotions in every individual. Books have the ability to transform us and connect us with the world around us.



EPILOGUE

“The Echoes of Unwritten Truths”¹

The library is a dark and silent place, its shelves towering to the ceiling, packed with books from all eras and corners of the world. Each aisle seems to lead to a different universe, and the air carries the unmistakable scent of old paper and forgotten stories. A dim, almost magical light seems to flow from the books' pages, moving subtly as if alive, lighting candles to illuminate the scene.

Suddenly, the library door creaks open, slow and long. A sudden gust of wind rushes into the room, as though an ancient force had been unleashed. The draft scatters loose pages from an open book and topples a precarious stack of volumes. They crash to the ground with a disrespectful clatter. But the most surprising thing is yet to come.

On the floor, the books seem to stir, as if trying to wake up. Their pages rustle with energy, as though some hidden power had been released. From these volumes, human figures begin to emerge. At first, they are blurry shadows, but as they take shape, they become real characters, each carrying the weight of a story that, until now, existed only in the imagination of those who brought them to life through writing and reading.

Mwamba steps out of the book *Tintin in the Congo*. He rises slowly from the ground, brushing off the dust and rubbing his forehead with an expression of frustration. He's wearing clothes he didn't choose, too big and full of clichés, designed by someone who never truly understood who he is.

–Always the same. They always pull me out of a book that's not mine, – says Mwamba indignantly, though trying to stay calm. –Someone, years ago, decided who I would be, how I would speak, how I would be seen. But I'm not 'a Congolese.' I have a name, Mwamba. Remember it well, because this time, I'm speaking for myself.”

Mwamba looks around. Other characters have started to take form and are watching him intently. The Blue Fairy steps out of *Pinocchio*, her dress shining blue and elegant but she's visibly tired, like someone who has endured too many expectations for too long.

–Mwamba, I understand your struggle. I've spent centuries trapped in a role I didn't choose: the perfect fairy. Always a tool in service of a morality that isn't mine. The one who saves everyone but never herself. I wonder... what if I wanted to make mistakes too? What if I wanted to be just a fleeting shadow instead of a constant light?

The Hunchback of Notre-Dame emerges from his book, his back hunched and eyes half-hidden beneath a hood. With a voice full of gravity and strength but punctuated by pauses, like someone used to reflecting before speaking, he says:

–You know what's worst, Mwamba? They do it with good intentions. They wanted me to be... what? A symbol? A lesson? But I don't need their pity, I don't want compassion. I just want them to look me in the eyes. To see me as a person, not as a piece of stone to feel sorry for.

Manolito Gafotas bursts onto the scene with energy, his glasses reflecting a carefree, ironic humour and his pragmatic attitude.

1. This epilogue and the image have been created in dialogue with ChatGPT.

–You lot are so philosophical! Such drama! I'll tell you straight: in my house, we never had time for these kinds of things. Problems? They're simpler: paying the bills, avoiding the teacher's scolding, making sure no one nicks my sandwich... But at least those are real problems, aren't they?

Charlie, from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, has been observing the scene from a distance but now decides to chime in, spurred by what Manolito just said. He speaks with a kind tone, naive yet thoughtful, like someone who sees hope even in hardship.

–But, Manolito, don't dismiss fantasy. I grew up in a poor place, just like you, but... dreaming gave me strength. Imagination can be very real, you know? It's not just for escape, but for finding paths no one else sees. To change things, you first have to dream them.

Momo steps out of her book with a calm but magnetic presence. Her eyes seem to see beyond, filled with a surprising wisdom for her age.

–Maybe it's time we stop talking only about ourselves, the characters. What about the children who read us? What happens when children only know the world through the stories adults write for them? If they never learn to think for themselves, they'll just repeat what they already know, and nothing will change.

–Exactly, Momo– Mwamba replies, his voice harder, more determined. Each word seems to carry the weight of his history. – I was created so that white children would believe I was happy being... a slave. But I don't want to be fixed, or erased. I want them to tell what was done to us, for them to know it all: the pain, the exploitation, the death. I want them to know why I was created this way. If they don't, they'll never fight to stop it from happening again.

–Quite right– the Blue Fairy says in a softer but equally convincing tone. It's clear she wants to be understood, even letting her composure slip a little. – We gain nothing if they hide us or make us 'prettier.' Stories need to sting, they need to hurt sometimes. Because only when you stir the waters do you discover what's hidden at the bottom.

–Adults don't like discomfort. But children are braver than they think. They understand far more than they're given credit for– the Hunchback says, his tone heavy but charged with energy. –If we let them read the truth, maybe they'll learn to change it.

–Exactly, exactly– Manolito adds with a teasing tone, though there's a hint of admiration in his voice for what's being said. –Let them read us, and if it bothers them, even better! You know what? Stories don't need to be all rainbows and roses. Life isn't!

Mwamba looks at the book he emerged from, his expression a mix of disdain and melancholy.

–Yes, enough of being symbols, enough of being lessons! We're here to remind them that stories are not innocent. They can build a world... or destroy one. – Mwamba looks at you, the reader of this epilogue. –And we, with your help, can be the cracks that break down these walls that imprison us.

Mwamba walks towards you, seeking your gaze. The other characters follow, drawing closer to you. Momo, however, remains absorbed in thought, staring at the candles lighting the room. Suddenly, she lifts her head and looks at you. Her eyes convey a deep emotion.

–Stories are weapons. Weapons to resist, to dream, to fight. But only if you let us be free. –Momo pauses, then softly but firmly adds, –Read us. Listen to us. Give us life.

Momo moves forward with the rest of the characters, all of them approaching you with intense gazes. Though it unsettles you, you try to meet their eyes, to understand their anger, their tenderness, their irony, their truths, which are your truths.

