

The Importance of Literacy and Books in Children's Development - Intellectual, Affective and Social Dimensions by Denise von Stockar

As an introduction to this workshop, I will present some general thoughts on the challenges of children's literature, hoping to provide a frame for the other presentations, as well as for our group discussions.

All literature, and literacy, is born from the human need to tell stories, to tell stories about one self or about others, to tell stories about the world to better understand our existence, the others and the universe we live in. All the stories, the myths, the fables and the novels, including those addressed to children are, in fact, the result of this wish and this basic need: they help us to live, to survive; they help children to grow up and develop.

I think it is important that we keep this perspective in mind while we discuss different aspects and different strategies for adequate reading education and fruitful reading promotion.

Production of children's books has always been amazingly diverse; its multiple titles address young readers in very different ways: there are books that furnish information and transfer knowledge on the world around us; others present an image of children's everyday life, or an image of their feelings and their conflicts, proposing how to solve them. There are books which talk about the Other, other cultures, other customs, or there are books about diverse cultural patrimonies... Each of these books carries a message and a specific perspective. We, the adults, are well aware of this but children do not really know these differences. That is why I think it is very important that children become familiar at the earliest possible age with the different literary genres so they learn to use them as they want. Because the true reading pleasure lies in the satisfaction we get from reading something that talks to us and touches us personally.

So a child may access the enormous literary resources, he must, of course, learn to read, and this in the broadest meaning of the word. Because reading, from a global point of view, is a very complex activity which is not limited to decoding a text, but it entails too the child's capability to understand what he has read, to integrate it in his own context and personal experiences by analysing it in a critical way so he is able to take a stand on what he has read. Only this kind of complete and deep reading education will take children toward a real, integrated literacy.

However, reading education, the way it is performed, in Europe and in Africa, is too frequently associated only to the decoding techniques that school has to teach.

Reading education that wants to be sustainable should not content itself with transferring simple technical skills, but should make use of a whole array of indispensable competences for a real literacy. These competences frequently are linked to experiences children have had in their first months and their first years: very common experiences at first sight, but of great importance because they awaken children to the universe of reading and literature, beaconing the road to literacy.

I. Learning to read is learning to see ...

The child "reads" his mother's face since he is born, or his father's or any other close person's face: the child learns to look at the features and facial expressions of those around him and to react in an adequate manner

Then the child begins to “read” the objects he finds around him. He observes, recognizes and identifies them, getting ready for the next big step: reading and identifying real objects within the book, that is, identifying objects that are no more than iconographic representations of reality on a book’s page.

Around the sixth month, a baby acquires this iconic skill, that is, he learns to know the difference between the real object and the image it represents. In other words, he enters the world’s symbolic representation: the secret of all art, visual or literary.

From this first discovery of symbolic representation, the child starts to develop his skills in picture reading which become more and more sophisticated with time :

- 1) First the child points at the various objects that interest him on the picture.
- 2) Later, he points at them and names them. But he does not tell much, his language is still non-narrative.
- 3) After some time, this child can point at and name the image’s elements while telling a story. But it is not yet the book’s story; it is a personal story that comes from the associations the child makes between the picture and his own life. His language has become more narrative.
- 4) Finally, he succeeds in pointing at and talking about the picture’s elements while telling an end to the story in the book, detached from his personal experience: he now knows that there is a difference between his own story and that of the book.
- 5) At last, he points at the elements not only of an isolated picture, but of all the set of images that he can use as support to tell, in a narrative language, the entire story related in the book.

In this moment of his development a child can make a true visual reading of a picture book, based on the pictures. He learns to read the pictures’ grammar, and this prepares him for the reading of texts. The iconographic elements constitute the message of a picture which corresponds, from a linguistic point of view, to the letters, as graphic elements, that come together to form words, then sentences, then paragraphs and chapters of a book.

To be able to come this long way from simply pointing at visual elements to a visual reading of a complete series of pictures, the child must be able to look at several pictures, read many picture books, and this must be done in the company of an adult who guides him, and incites him to look and to interpret.

And once he starts going to school, the child should by all means continue to look at pictures, to read picture books, because prolonged visual reading will be an efficient support for text reading. Moreover, it will inspire and stimulate the ability to form inner pictures.

Finally, the child who has the possibility of looking regularly at picture books learns to cross another very important bridge of his psychological development. According to French psychiatrist Serge Tisseron, the small child places himself first within the pictures he is looking at; in consequence these pictures invade him very easily. Only after having watched several picture books he is able to take distance from the pictures he sees: he learns to place himself before the pictures, which lose the frequently menacing impact on him. This ability to deal with and wish to control the pictures they see, appears to me as very important for the children of our times, frequently facing excessively tough and aggressive pictures for their young sensibilities.

II Learning to read is also learning to listen...

Literacy does not start only with watchful eyes, but also with listening ears...

During the first months of his life, the baby listens to his mother's voice, his father's voice or that of the person taking care of him. From these voices, the baby starts to build up his own voice and his personal language. At the same time, he learns to identify the voices of those who surround him. And while they sing a song or tell a story, the child discovers the poetic voice of the people around him, the melodious and singing voice that is so different from the everyday voice that gives orders and information needed for everyday life. This poetic voice is not only more beautiful, it tells little stories too, sings songs and nursery rhymes that introduce the child in the universe of literature and prepares his sensibility for these artistic forms, the simplest ones, the most archaic ones.

It is very important that we sing to babies, that we tell them not only one but many, many stories, at the most diverse moments of the day, in every occasion possible: invented stories, read or remembered, heard stories...

These moments of storytelling are privileged moments, full of tenderness and suspense during which the child may discover, even before learning to read, the magic of literature, the story's power.

Serge Tisseron, again, teaches us that the child who listens to stories when he is a baby, lives within the stories, like they were part of him. Only later, after having heard many stories, he starts to keep the stories at a distance, like something exterior to him that he now may integrate better.

III Learning to read is also learning to communicate...

Listening to stories, looking at and interpreting picture books that tell stories...

These early reading experiences are central and are not possible without an adult who prepares them and directs them.

To read a picture book with one or several children: a simple reading scenario quite familiar to many adults... But are they really aware of the very ideal context those picture book reading moments offer for the child's first communicative experiences?

When the child and the adult look together at a picture book, their regards are automatically converging toward the same end, the book and its story. It is a joint regard that creates, for the first time, the triangular space among the child, the adult and the book, and is the origin of every cultural transmission⁵: the adult takes the child into a cultural creation that is the picture book, important precursor of all other cultural supports.

At the same time, this small scenario –shared reading of a picture book–marks another crucial moment in the biography of childhood reading.

Every child loves to point with his finger at the pictorial elements, the objects on the pictures of the book that he is looking at and explaining proudly to the adult. This action – even if it seem so modest – is not only remarkable from the point of view of reading skills (see above), but also and most important from the stand point of the child's psychological development. Because by showing something to someone, the child demonstrates to the adult his perception and his subjective impression of what he is seeing. It is a spontaneous action that always assumes that the child

already has an idea of the Other's existence whom he is showing his wish to communicate actively with.

In such a situation of emerging interaction, it is very important that the adult sees and takes into account what the child is showing him. And that he reacts to this formidable impulse with excitement toward what the child is showing him. This demands an attentive presence, a great sensibility and a considerable availability from the adult. But it is worth it. Because if the adult does not react to what the child is showing him, the child will lose the impulse of showing, and moreover, his trust in the *Other* and in his ability to communicate.

By pointing with his finger at what interests him, the child is showing his intersubjectivity: I am communicating with another one. However, this scenario must be repeated numerous times so the ability to communicate and the habit of doing it may converge in the emergent reader. Later, the child will not be happy with just pointing with his finger; he will talk with pleasure about what he sees and what he thinks of the story. The adult must continue to listen to him, respectfully, patiently stimulating this interaction so important for true literacy. From this perspective, the child who has the possibility of discovering in this active way several picture books, in an animated dialogue with an adult or his peers that share the reading session, is a privileged one.

Later, at school age, when he will look less frequently at picture books in the company of an adult, but will read stories on his own, the child will continue to depend, even more so, on communicating about what he has read. Because of this, the adults must be as available as before, but in another way: they have to continue being interested in what their children are reading and they have to encourage them to talk, to interchange ideas, in an open discussion without any school evaluation. So the child will understand, in a definitive way that reading is also a matter of communication, therefore, a social issue.

It is only during such on-going interactive readings that the child can fully develop his language competences, his vocabulary and his way to express himself; but also his social competences in the larger sense of the term.

IV The book is finally an object...

Indeed, the book, ideal support for initiating and learning to read, is above all –we must not forget it– a physical object that the child must domesticate. By manipulating it, chewing on it, sucking it, turning it around in every sense, the child slowly takes possession of his book. Later he will learn, always in a playful manner, to use it correctly: how to turn its pages, how to hold it the right way, how to pretend he is reading images as well as the black signs that “hide” its story. This way he learns to behave like a reader, which is an important step on the road to literacy. To be successful, he must have role models: adults and the bigger children who read.

But we must not forget that messages transmitted in a book are organised in diverse manners. There are books that are read from top to bottom, others from left to right, like in the western cultures, and even others from right to left. The organisation of the narrative depends entirely on the culture that produces it; discovering it allows the budding reader to familiarise with cultures different from his own.

On the psychological level the book, especially the picture book, may play another role yet: that of transitional object that offers a wonderful transitional space between the child's personal feelings and sensibility and the exterior reality, in which the child can develop his own imagination, his own feelings that help to separate himself from his parents, to live, and thus resolve his own psychological conflicts and find his own identity.

From this psychological point of view, the child uses the book as a screen on which he can project his own experiences. The pictures and the words of the story act as mirrors in which the children's conflicts and feelings –fear, jealousy, aggressiveness, loneliness, and the need, the wish of being loved and accepted– are reflected while offering the child fictional alternatives and solutions to which he might perhaps never have found access any other way.

This way, the child can play with the fictional possibilities because they are literary and he can integrate them into his own life adding thus new elements.

V Why How does reading become a pertinent personal experience?

We have seen that learning to read is more than learning the alphabet and decoding it. True literacy, objective of wise teaching, depends as a matter of fact on quite some other skills very often neglected, especially in the school scenario: the ability to read and understand pictures, to listen and integrate stories told out loud, to know how to communicate with others regarding what has been read and, finally, to familiarize with the book as a cultural object. Developing all these complex skills and interdependences must continue throughout childhood and puberty, at school and at home.

There is, however, one more challenging question: what to do so the child can discover the pleasure of reading, its usefulness and its pertinence for his own life?

How may he build a universe of essential reading that develops in relation to, or in close interaction with, his personal everyday universe?

Reading contributes in a concrete way to the very sense of our lives if it is endowed with meaning. We have to teach children not only to read, but to acknowledge the importance and actuality of knowing how to read within the context of their own life, teach them to grasp the true meaning of what is written, the role it can play in their personal lives and in the society they live in.

From this point of view, to read is not only to find the meaning of what is written. To read is also and above all, as the French psycholinguist Jean-Marie Besse says: "To understand the reason for this activity and the nature of this way of expression." From this perspective, the young reader must grasp what he has read in order to integrate it into his own everyday personal experiences: reading becomes thus an integral part of his life. Jean-Marie Besse has stated that the origin of reading problems that so many adults have is found not only in failure to decode words and lack of text comprehension skills, but above all in a total ignorance of the meaning and usefulness of written texts regarding our own life. Developing this crucial relation between reading and personal life begins, it is true, at home. Nevertheless it grows in a decisive way at school. Or more accurately in the relation among the different social spaces that are the school, the family, the extracurricular activities, the group of friends. Because above all the interpersonal, social and affective dimensions participating in the constitution of this personal relation to the written text, motivate children to persevere in learning and improving reading.

In conclusion, I am in favour of an active network of school and non-school environments where children can have positive reading experiences within the frame of authentic diverse learning that is not limited to school but touch the different spaces of the child's world. More precisely, we have to create for children walkways – or more walkways – among the different universes of their personal lives. But how?

Source: <http://www.ibby.org/index.php?id=718>