

## Literature in Early Childhood<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article discusses the reading of literature in early childhood. It is based on the standpoint that literature, this cultural heritage, contributes to the infant's entry into the symbolic order. The article will also discuss the importance of literature for the development of the child's thinking and imagination; as well as for the development of the capacity to elaborate painful and inevitable situations of life.

**Keywords:** *Literature; Early Childhood; Reading; Symbolic Order; Elaboration*

*"A book is a toy made of letters. To read is to play".*

*Rubem Alves*

In the presentation of *Receite um livro* [1] (*Recite a book*), there is a recommendation from the Brazilian Society of Pediatrics for parents, teachers, caregivers and educators in general to read, sing, talk, and make rhymes for children since a very early age. This is because such activities are important for the children's psychic development.

A similar recommendation is made in Hugo Mães's novel [2] *O filho de mil homens* (*The Son of a Thousand Men*). In this book, there is a dialogue between Alfredo, an old man, and Camilo, a boy. The old man says "I imagined that a non-reader went to the doctor and the doctor watched him and said, 'You have a high level of cholesterol. If you continue like this, you won't survive'. And the doctor asked 'Have you been abusing of fried foods and eggs? Have you been reading enough?'" The patient responded by saying he had not read for a long time because either he did not like it or because he was lazy. Then the doctor added "Oh, so be aware that either you urgently read a good novel or we will see you at your funeral in a few weeks".

In a beautiful text, Candido [3] defends literature as a fundamental human right. For the author "literature corresponds to a universal need that must be satisfied, under penalty of mutilating the personality, because since it gives shape to our feelings and to our world perspective, it organizes us, frees us from chaos, and therefore humanizes us" [4].

According to him, the literary text, being an organization of words in a structured whole, communicates to our spirit, first organizing us and then organizing the world. And "this occurs from the simplest forms such as the nursery rhyme, the proverb, the history of animals (...)" and of course until the most complex and erudite texts.

By humanization, Candido understands "the process which confirms in men those traits that we consider essential, such as the exercise of reflection, the acquisition of knowledge, a good disposition towards others, the refinement of emotions, the ability to penetrate in the problems of life, the sense of beauty, the perception of the complexity of the world and the beings, the cultivation of humor" [5]. Literature develops our humanity because it makes us more sensitive to nature, society and to people in general.

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Therefore, based on the ideas mentioned above, I intend in this work to defend the reading of literature in early childhood, since its beginning and throughout all its stages, because the cultural heritage represented by literature can contribute in an important way to the infant's entry into the symbolic order. In addition, the reading made by the mother, or by those who take care of the baby, brings into play the human voice, another key element for his or her psychic organization.

However, when one talks about reading to babies, I often hear arguments depreciating this experience, that since the baby does not understand, does not speak yet, and therefore cannot take advantage from this. Other times, the arguments go in the direction of valuing the importance of reading, supported by the possible contribution of this experience to the future process of learning to read and even to the development of the babies' appetite for reading.

Without denying this last argument, that I consider true, the direction that this work will take will be other; to justify the reading procedure (of literature) for the early childhood, considering two fundamental points: its value for the construction of the psychism or, in other words, for the humanization of the infant, thus developing his or her thinking abilities and his or her imaginative capacity, and as a second point, as a resource to overcome or elaborate painful and inevitable situations in life.

### Reading, psychic construction and humanization

Benveniste [6] teaches us that language is in the nature of men and that it "teaches the very definition of man." It is through language, through the entry into the symbolic order, that the newborn becomes humanized. But at birth and even before birth, this process already starts, even though in a rudimentary way, and is completed with language acquisition. Thus, it is through contact with the other people, with the language coming from the other, that the human creation becomes human.

Diatkine [7] observes that the belief that language only developed in infants from the second year of life existed for a long time and that, before, the alternation between screams and babbles was enough to reveal to the mother the state of satisfaction or necessity of the baby. However, several studies have shown that the baby already has, at birth, the ability to discriminate the mother's voice, in addition to respond to it in a meaningful way.

Cabrejo-Parra [8], corroborating the previous idea, observes that the baby already comes into the world with the ability to distinguish his or her mother's voice from the voices of other people in the environment. He or she is therefore able to make a first "reading", although still very rudimentary. The inscription of the mother's voice in the baby's psychism begins in the mother's womb, around four months of pregnancy, when the fetal hearing capacity is organized in such a way that the sound information is already accessible to his or her hearing aid. And this capacity of mental discrimination enables the babies to set thinking in motion.

The child, since the beginning of life, is bathed in the language of others, which is sometimes addressed to him or her, sometimes not. But when the mother takes care of the baby, while performing the motherhood, it is normal for her to speak, name the parts of the body; telling what she is doing: *Let's take a shower, wash the feet. Hmm, what a chubby little hand, what a nice water*, for example. Other times she sings, fables, tells childhood memories, dreams, wishes and daydreams. We already know that the baby is sensitive to discrete differences. We can think that the child does not understand anything that is being said, but the mother, even though she knows it, still speaks. Diatkine [9] also stresses that, in these mother's speeches, the baby "(...) is confronted with this double language game: the first linked to the present experience, and the second modulated by the variations of the mother's psychic reality and the contradictions of her daydreams, a mystery for now undecipherable for one and witnessing the most authentic movements of the other".

All of this contributes to the development of the baby's psychism, which can discriminate and memorize events, as well as the mother's states of mind. Other times the language experiences are made from a happy game of mutual imitation. The baby chirps and the mother repeats, stimulating and differentiating the game more and more, in a real communicative exercise, and also of mutual recognition and acceptance.

Cabrejo-Parra makes an interesting observation regarding these exchanges between mother and baby. He reminds us that different cultures create the so-called triangulation toys, such as rattles, and others, that favor the baby's psychic organization. These are objects that both the mother and the baby look at as a third party, in which the two are interested together; a very different situation from the initial narcissistic looks. Cabrejo-Parra [10] compares these objects, a kind of transitional objects, to the baby's first syllables. So, when the mother is interested in the baby's syllables, she is also interested in his or her psychic activity, which means introducing the triangulation, thus allowing the child to create the necessary psychic differences for the construction of thought.

It is important to emphasize that in this language game, the child begins to take possession of both the meaning and the prosody of the language, building, based on the internalization of the acoustic traces of the mother's voice, his or her own voice. The voice, at the same time so personal and intimate, is built from someone else's voice. It is this acceptance by the other that allows us to move from scream to voice. If we build our own voice, it is because we were initiated by the speech of the other, which allowed us to move from scream to speech. In this sense, the voice already brings the symbolic presence of the other. This psychic ubiquity, which is inherent to the construction of the subject, makes each speaker a spokesperson, that is: that in the person's voice, he or she brings the acoustic traces of those who gave him access to language.

Cabrejo-Parra [11] emphasizes the importance of a certain aspect of the voice, which is the possibility of its modulation. Only men and birds have the extraordinary ability to modulate sounds. And this ability, in the human being, has a unique richness, because through it people are able to express the different passions of the soul: love, hate, contempt, anguish, fear, indignation, joy, humor, irony and so on. In this way, not only the words mean something, but they are also modulated, modified, intensified by the tone and expressiveness of the voice. And the baby, even before knowing the meanings of the words, is already sensitive to the modulation of the voice. He or she reacts to the whisper that soothes him or her, is scared by the harshness of the voice and is delighted by its melody.

Among other authors, Anzieu [12] also emphasizes the importance of the *sound mirror*, of the sound exchanges between the baby and his or her mother for the child's psychic construction. The author proposes the idea "of an auditory-phonetic skin, and its function in the acquisition, by the psychic apparatus, of the capacity to produce meaning and then to symbolize. Before the look and smile of the mother who feeds and cares for the baby produces in the child an image of him or herself that is visually perceptible and that is internalized to reinforce his or her *self* and outline the baby's ego, the melodic bath (the mother's voice, her songs, the music that she offers) provides a sound mirror that the baby uses at first for his or her crying (the mother's voice calms the baby in response), then for his or her babbling and, finally, for his or her phonetic articulation games" [13].

### Literature and the experience of dealing with painful situations

I once heard from a two- or three-year-old girl, while dealing with her parents' separation, asking in her childish language: "Sing to me *O cravo brigou com a rosa*" (*The carnation fought with the rose*, a famous Brazilian nursery rhyme), a request which was repeated a few times. With this children's song, the little girl, at the same time that she was elaborating her parents' separation, seemed to feel recognized and welcomed in her pain.

Many are the authors who recognize the value of storytelling, of the stories that children are told in order to help them deal with the painful situations of life. In a beautiful text written by Benjamin [14], entitled *Narrative and healing*, the author discusses the healing function of storytelling. He talks about the mother's relationship with her sick son. She puts him to bed and then begins to tell stories. She recalls that the healing through words was already known (through magic words). Here, I cannot forget the definition of psychoanalysis given by a patient: the *talking cure*, also recognized by Benjamin when he affirms that the narrative made by the patient in the presence of the analyst is already the beginning of the healing process. Finally, Benjamin [15] wonders: "Would not all the diseases be curable if they were carried along a river of stories all the way to that river's mouth? If we consider pain as a dam that blocks the flow of the narrative,

we can clearly see that the dam will burst when the slope is sufficiently steep to drag everything it finds in its path towards the blissful ocean of oblivion”.

Diatkine tells us that the stories that are read to children before bedtime allow them to better support their fear of the dark and the fear of dying, as well as the fear of losing the parents. It is also worth remembering at this point Freud’s remark regarding a boy who was afraid of the dark. Recognizing that the fear of both the dark and the loneliness is related to the absence of the beloved one who takes care of the child, the mother or a substitute caregiver, Freud tells us the observation he made of a child afraid of the dark saying out loud “But talk to me, auntie. I’m afraid!”. “Why? What good is that? You don’t even see me.” To which the child replies “If someone speaks, it becomes clearer” [16].

Also, Bettelheim [17], in the classic book, *Psychoanalysis of fairy tales*, recognizes the value of tales and narratives to help children deal with their fears, uncertainties and traumatic situations in life. There are many adversities in a child’s life (illness, abandonment, loss of a loved one, violence of all kinds, among others) that prevent them from building a positive sense of existence. The author recognizes, then, that the most difficult task in children education is precisely that of helping them find meaning in life. And in relation to the fulfillment of this task, Bettelheim emphasizes, in the first place, the care of parents or other caregivers, and then he emphasizes the value of the cultural heritage transmitted to the child through stories. The author also states that “For a story to really catch the child’s attention, it must entertain and arouse the curiosity. But to enrich the child’s life, it must stimulate his or her imagination: help the child to develop his or her intellect and make the emotions clear; be in harmony with the child’s anxieties and aspirations; fully recognize his or her difficulties and, at the same time, suggest a solution to the problems that disturb the child” [18].

### Closing Remarks/Conclusion

We believe that literature in early childhood is extremely important for human development in terms of building thought, imagination, improving the language and elaborating the problems of life. Naturally, this contribution will have an important effect on the child’s learning process and also on his or her reading pleasure and enjoyment. In this sense, literature is an important stimulus for the appropriation of culture and the social integration of the subject.

Literature, as we understand it here, comprises not only the stories told, the fables, the nursery rhymes and the children’s folk song, but also the classical and erudite literature. And reading brings into play three movements that constitute the activity of reading. It is about reading the information that comes from the world of intersubjectivity, a world that, in Cabrejo-Parra’s conception, develops all kinds of feelings and emotions. But it is also about reading information from the physical world, from the external world. And finally, it is about reading what happens inside ourselves. Reading intertwines these possibilities of relationships: with the other, with reality and with ourselves, so that without even knowing it, we are always reading three books: the one of intersubjectivity, the one of the world and the internal book. Thus, the author recognizes that “the other book that we can hold in our hands is finally a kind of echo of the book that we carry within us.”.

In her book, Bonafé [19] tells the experience of A.C.C.E.S., of animated readings for babies. These are meetings in which the babies are offered books that they can manipulate as they want. There is an animator who coordinates the session with the books and who reads them, but the babies have all the freedom to move around and to interact between themselves. Nothing is forced. The idea is to bring the children closer to the written text. The experience neither aims at learning how to read, nor that in the end they become readers, but to allow the children to discover that texts are things that carry meanings and that thus they can also build meanings.

Cabrejo-Parra, an important collaborator of the A.C.C.E.S., clarifies that in the reading sessions happens what occurred in the beginning with the oral language. “The baby quickly understands what the adults say, the movement of his or her mouth, the sound has a meaning

that the baby interprets. (...) but we do not know what they understand, yet we know that they understood something and that a kind of psychic movement happened." Babies build different things from listening to the text, observing and handling books. In the same way that they also "read" the world. Somehow they manage to realize the differences between what is written and the images, and to realize that the text has a meaning.

And in which way can these experiences be important for the psychopedagogue? Both the reading for babies and also for all early childhood seems to me an excellent manner to build the subject of learning. Learning how to read too, but mainly the construction and development of interpretive, cognitive, and imaginative skills. It thus contributes to the child's integration in the culture.

I can think of at least two contributions. The first directly with the children or their parents, at school, at the nursery, and at the clinic. The second in the formation of professionals linked to early childhood care: educators, teachers, and professionals from daycare and other institutions that provide early childhood care.

In the clinical work, the use of reading literature for children with learning difficulties has been shown to be very productive. I mention here the experience of Barone [20] with a boy with learning difficulties in reading, in which all the assistance was permeated by reading children's texts. At first the texts were chosen by the psychopedagogue, but after a short time, they were demanded by the patient. At first, it called the attention the way that the boy heard the stories. He used to lie down on his desk, closing his eyes, and sometimes I suspected that he was sleeping. But I soon realized that he was enchanted by the sound of my voice. I wondered if he was understanding what I was reading, as he seemed to be immersed in his daydreams and pleasure. However, I could see that little by little he started asking me to write the name of one or another character in the story. Then he started asking me to write the name of the story, so he could copy it. At the same time, he made drawings to illustrate the story that he was hearing.

Another fragment of the assistance provided to this boy that is worth highlighting was his reaction after hearing the fable *The Bear and the Bees*, by Leonardo Da Vinci [21]. The fable tells the story of a little bear that finds honey in the hole of a tree. But when he starts to eat the honey, a flock of angry bees begins to sting him. The bear tries to defend himself as he can, but failing to do so, he comes back, completely stung, to his mother. After hearing the fable, the boy is very anxious and wants to propose a different end to the story. In his proposal, the father comes to rescue the son, helping him to get rid of the bees.

This episode revealed an issue of the boy. Having been abandoned by his father while still in his mother's womb, he needed a father who could make the symbolic separation from the symbiotic relationship with his mother, an important step in this case for his learning. And through contact with the fable that he heard, the boy had the opportunity to address an important issue in his subjective constitution, being able to express himself.

I remember a work done with the mothers of the children that were assisted in a psychopedagogical clinic of an IES (Institute of Higher Education, in the Portuguese abbreviation), for presenting difficulties in learning how to read. Many of these mothers, coming from a less favored social class, did not know how to read or had a large gap in their reading level. The work took place through the reading, made by the psychopedagogue, of various fables and short stories, followed by a moment of discussion of the themes that were presented, of the associations made from the stories that were heard, but also a discussion about the learning difficulties of reading and the difficulties of the children. The reading, in most cases, was done by the psychopedagogue, but there was the possibility of a text being read by some participant, if they wanted. The experience seemed to be very rich for the participants, who participated with joy while their children were assisted by an intern, a student of the institution's undergraduate course in psychopedagogy.

In this work, all mothers received the text that would be read in each session, so that they could follow the reading, if desired. In many meetings, the only participant who had a better reading level offered to read. But one day she was absent. One of the participants who said she did not know how to read or write, although she had attended the first years of elementary school, offered to read. At first, hesitantly, but later with a certain firmness, she read the text and was surprised by the fact that she was able to do so.

In addition to the proposals mentioned here, I believe that the psychopedagogue may, from them, create other possibilities which enhance our practice and meet the different demands of our students, patients and institutions that seek our services.

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