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Preschool education – a premise for literary culture formation

Cornelia Ștefănescu a, Oana Stoican b *

aBucharest University, Panduri street, 061071, Bucharest, Romania
bBucharest University, Panduri street, 061071, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

Children’s contact with literary texts in kindergarten is realised by reference to preschool curriculum, the texts selection taking into account to achieving some objectives, taking into account a progressive difficulty corresponding to the age level. The present study is based on the idea that the selection of literary texts used in kindergarten activities depends on a sum of criteria which vary both in form and content. Consequently, we decided to investigate the modalities in which the literary text is selected and made accessible in teaching activities with pre-schoolers.

Keywords: preschool education, literary culture, children’s literature, preschool curriculum, selection criteria

1. Introduction

Literary culture means periodically accessing literary works, a process which is based on text memory, on creating a background of various references and on the ability to identify elements that connect authors and works together.

Jean Hebrard talks about creating a formed, constructed, coherent and self-referential literary universe to which the child has access after repeated and regular meetings, each text generating links to other texts. In order for this literary universe to be created the child's permanent contact to literature is necessary to create a literary memory of the texts linked together in a network of references to facilitate further understanding of heard or read works. This literary universe, the foundation for an early literary culture, facilitates the child knowledge of life experiences, a contact with the first values, discovering conflicts or dramas of an existence unknown until then. Thus the child-receiver establishes a personal relationship with the text world according to its own interpretation, but he develops

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +4-074-206-3368; fax: +4-023-762-0001.
E-mail address: oana.stoican@yahoo.com
an understanding of the text common with that of other children: "A literary culture is constituted through regular attendance of literary works. It involves a memory of texts but also of language, an ability to retrieve with each reading, elements linking works between them. It is a network of reference around which new reading coagulate. Each reading is an updating of previous lectures and a launch pad for new readings" (Chartier & Hebrard, 2000). This definition is perfectly transferable to the situation of children in kindergarten where daily contact with various literary works ensures the implementation of a network of cultural references between which different connections are established.

The first contact between a child and literature occurs in an informal environment, in the family, through the easy-to-read texts that family members do on several occasions. In kindergarten the encounter with literature is done in an organized, formal way, through teachers. This activity in kindergarten is essential because children are given cognitive and affective activated plans on the one hand, purchasing, before learning to read, a volume of information, images, characters, character systems, forms of language and, on the other hand, experiencing emotions, new feelings.

The teacher must make an analysis of the children’s needs regarding the selection of literary texts to be used in teaching, while taking into account the learning objectives and cultural purposes targeted by completing imaginative texts.

The problem of determining the criteria by which the literary texts are selected is one of wide interest, generating discussions, thorough analysis to identify formulas that refer to different levels of pupils, addressing literature receivers from the stage of preschool when they come in contact with the text orally up to the stage of informed reader familiar with the literature in the most subtle forms of it (Butlen, 2008).

Starting from a number of criteria identified in literature (CNDP, 2006), concerning the choice of texts in kindergarten, we formulated general criteria for selecting literature books used in teaching preschoolers:

Regarding the form:
- the quality and durability of materials used for printing books that allow many uses in activities with children;
- the aesthetic appearance of illustrations, vivid colour, consistency between text and image;
- the ease in handling printed material, especially when it comes to young children.

Regarding the content:
- the variety of creative periods, both classical and contemporary works being selected;
- the variety of literary genres (lyric, epic and dramatic);
- presence of archetypal characters, allowing children to understand typological traits that characters can have: courage, bravery, kindness, malice, envy, avarice etc.
- the diversity of narrative constructions, in terms of chronology, the exposure modes (narrative, descriptive texts or dialogue), the narrative (the 1st or 3rd person);
- the availability and variety of language;
- the suitability of the contents to children's sphere of preoccupations and area of origin (rural, urban).

However, in kindergarten, in addition to literature texts there are texts created by teachers according to the needs that had come up during group work: physical and psychological characteristics of children's speech, the theme of the week or of the project, the staff structure, various events, customs and traditions.

2. Research design

In the research we focused on the following objectives:
- Identifying the criteria for selecting literary texts for children in kindergarten activities;
- Emphasizing options that teachers have in the selection of texts in terms of formal organization.

In order to obtain the necessary information for carrying out this study, a questionnaire has been developed that was distributed to a group of 70 preschool teachers. Out of the 70 questionnaires 63 have been validated, the errors are due mainly to blank fields or incorrect completion.
2.1. Research hypotheses

In this study we assumed that the selection of literary texts used in kindergarten activity depends on a sum of criteria that vary both in terms of form and in terms of content. The selection of texts used in teaching in kindergarten is customized according to the way literature is assimilated by children. Versified texts attract by rhythm, musicality, the atmosphere created, ease of reproduction, while texts in prose impose through the story brought before small audiences and dramatic texts impress through enhanced emotional involvement due to staging.

Thus, we advance the idea that a variety of literary texts is used in kindergarten, available to children through various ways, rigorously selected according to different criteria.

2.2. Sample

The population investigated showed interest in terms of how they use children's literature texts for their own activity, given that the sample had a heterogeneous structure, which enabled the collection of data relevant to the subject. The sample consists of subjects investigated in several counties (Vrancea, Brașov, Buzău, Galați).

2.2.1. Age distribution

In terms of age, the highest percentage is represented by the category of persons aged 30-40 years, the percentage being of 40%. The other age groups - 19-30 years, 40-50 years, 50+ years - have almost equal shares, representing 19%, 19% and 22% of the sample.

2.2.2. Distribution by level of education

Out of the 63 respondents whose questionnaires were valid, four are pedagogical high school graduates, four post-secondary school graduates and 55 university graduates. Among university graduates, 32 are graduates of the specialization Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education.

2.2.3. The institution where they work

- **Environment.** Out of the 63 teachers, 42 are active in urban areas, representing 67% of all respondents. Good material facilities available in urban kindergartens and a good part of those in rural areas constitute favourable premises of using properly the various means of facilitating literary text.
- **Kindergarten type.** The questioned teachers come in a relatively equally both from Kindergartens with normal hours (54%) and in kindergarten with extended hours (46%). This is relevant for the present research as the time spent in kindergarten normal program is different in terms of amount from the time spent in the extended program that offers more opportunities for exploitation of the literary text, given the wide range of activities, especially the type of activities at the discretion of children.
- **Type group.** 48% of subjects operate on simple groups and 52% of teachers in combined groups. And in this respect it is noted some balance of the sample. The activity in combined groups (consisting of different ages preschoolers) is characterized by a certain specific, involving a higher degree of difficulty, as the selected literary texts require different levels of perception, depending on the age of the children.

2.3. Instruments

The investigation was in the analysis and interpretation of data collected from the application of a questionnaire which covered issues such as the types of texts used, the criteria for selection of literary texts for children, formal organization types of texts and ways to accessing them. The questionnaire included both objective items that targeted highlighting the options the subjects have in the selection of texts - literary texts / texts created by teachers...
- of chosen types of form organization - poetry / prose / drama - as well as subjective items that led to identification of criteria for selecting children's literary texts used in the kindergarten.

3. Results and discussions

After processing the data we found that only 6% of subjects used exclusively texts created by teachers, for the vast majority of 94% literary texts being a valuable resource in teaching. Of all respondents, 75% believe that literary texts are the only resource that can be used optimally in teaching in kindergarten. This can be justified either by disbelief in the quality of creations of colleagues or their lack of imagination and creativity in the expressiveness of language. A low percentage of only 19% teachers use both types of texts, which induces the idea of limitation of quartering at the level of curricular indications, moreover, at the level of established, classical texts. In terms of formal organization of the texts used in teaching in kindergarten, we obtained the following results:

Table 1. Options for the formal organization of the texts used in kindergarten

| Formal organization of the chosen texts | Prose | Poetry | Drama | Prose + Poetry | Prose + Drama | Poetry + Drama | Prose + Poetry + Drama |
|----------------------------------------|-------|--------|-------|---------------|---------------|----------------|------------------------|
| Subjects                               | 22%   | 13%    | 6%    | 20%           | 11%           | 6%             | 22%                    |

Of the interviewed teachers, 22% choose only texts in prose, poetry, and only 13% exclusively poetry and 6% only dramatized texts. It is also noted that prose texts are selected by 75% of respondents, 60% versified texts and the text dramatized by 45%. From the collected data it follows that educators prefer prose texts, preference justified in terms of the accessibility of their reception by children, but also in terms of their exploiting modes, the didactical valence at their disposal. Poetry is also an option worthy of taking into consideration, due to rhythm, musicality, harmony, such texts are easily memorized by children. Dramatized texts are chosen by fewer teachers because of the nature of the text, its use requires a more developed material base but also the ability of preschool children to engage effectively in its staging.

Having to answer an open question, educators were asked to list the criteria for choosing the literary texts that they use in their work. Therefore, subjects identified various criteria that can be ordered on an axis, from the most important to the least: accessibility (75%), educational character (32%), suitability to the level of age and understanding of the child (23%), the high degree of attractiveness of the subject (22%), adaptation to the requirements of the curriculum (19%).

![Histogram of criteria for choosing literary texts](image)

Other criteria have been identified with a lower frequency, such as the available material basis, the concordance with the season and the important events of the year, the positive end, the presence of dialogue, the emotional
content. In a first analysis of the data it is observed that these criteria pertain largely to content without insisting on the material form, the concrete support of children's books.

We note that the text for children must meet the accessibility condition meaning a clear language predominantly concrete and easy to understand for children. Some criteria considered important - the educational aspect, age and suitability to the level of understanding of children, the adaptation to curriculum requirements - relate to a permanent report of the literary text to psychological and educational requirements that have a major importance in educational activities.

4. Conclusions

We conclude that, on preschool level, the child's contact with literary texts is made in relation to preschool curriculum, text selection being guided by achieving goals, taking into account the progressive difficulty depending on the age to which it is addressed. Thus, the aim is to stimulate the interest, enthusiasm, desire for knowledge, retelling, and reading, in all children starting with junior groups.

Different criteria may be applied in selecting texts used in kindergarten, without pretending that they are infallible and unique. The specialized literature identifies different selection methods, often suggesting their multiplicity and subjectivity (Held, 1985). Our study managed to draw out, from this range of points of view that can be used to choose literary texts for children, those who define the needs of preschoolers as accurately as possible.

The attention paid to little children leads to a selection of books specific to their age- the first contact with literature happening before the emergence of a genuine interest in fiction, before they enter school. The first forms of literature present in children's life do not involve narrativization, rather focusing on musicality, on language games, simple images that allow visualization elements of the surrounding reality. Subsequently, the text in prose intermediates children's access into the fictional world of the story. Dramatic text complements the story through its visual appearance which facilitates children's approach to characters and their actions. Thus, preschoolers gradually acquire skills that will have to be activated throughout their schooling and beyond, in their existence as readers. In terms of form children's preferences, reflected in the choices of educators, turn to prose texts chosen both exclusively and in combination with poetry and/or drama.

Through literature, children are placed in a different cultural universe, that of narrative and fiction literary texts enriching their imagination, their ability to produce their own mental images. By their form and content, literary texts activate children's imagination creating an inner life. In kindergarten, teaching literary texts form a default tenet (Pieper 2006) to which teachers report a well-known literary inventory at a national, even international, level allowing the approach of specific topics at this stage of schooling creating the need for story, fiction- subsequently satisfied by personal reading, which will lead to the formation of a literary culture.

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