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Family and affective models in children's literature. An approach from the texts for early readers at Valencian schools

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Abstract

In previous researches we have offered a panoramic view about the presence of family structures different from the traditional one in children's literature, (Oltra Albiach, 2011), about the (shy) presence of protagonists with homo-parent, single-parent families reconstructed or intercultural in children's titles and about the publications of these characteristics in the literature for first readers that have seen the light in recent years (Oltra Albiach & Pardo Coy, 2013). It is noted that the introduction of these literatures in initial schools remains in general a pending matter, especially if we take into account that it is an ideal level to prevent and treat stereotypes and prejudices and above all because xenophobic, sexist, homophobic behaviors and bullying in general can begin to occur at these ages. Therefore, we have tried to bring our gaze to pre-school and first cycle of primary education in order to analyze the titles that are offered to students as first readings, from the idea of the importance of literature as a mirror of the society that produces it, of its characteristics, its achievements, its desires and its fears, and also highlighting the importance of the family and affective models in general that we give the children in their first contact with the written literature. The research has been done during the course 2013/2014 in ten public and concerted schools of the Valencian Community.

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1. Traditional family models and the new family and affective structures

It is clear that the literature for children and young people constitutes an educational agency (Colomer, 2010, p.

49), as are the family and the school: in this sense, texts that are aimed at children and young people are an example of how society wants to see itself, and therefore, this type of literature is a mirror of the society that produces it. On the other hand, we find in the literature in particular a vital element for the construction of identities and the socialization of individuals: in this sense, Antonio Mendoza (1994, p. 13) emphasizes the importance of literature when assessing positively the differences between individuals and their enriching potential. In short, it is integrating these elements into an educational project that seeks to unite and not to be a factor for social exclusion, from basic aspects such as the integration of contents (an essential element of visibility), awareness and reduction of prejudices, the development of a psychology of equity and a flattering school culture of empowerment (Banks, 1997).

From the premise that says that what has a name exists (Romero Lombardo, 2011), takes on a special importance in children's literature the visibility of the social reality in its diversity and pluralism: the concealment of the various family realities present in our environment has resulted in the perpetuation of situations of inequality, injustice and suffering. So, one of the criteria that Gemma Lluch (2012, p. 223) provides when choosing literature for children and young people is that the characters represent social and cultural parameters of the context. Iñaki Tofiño (2006) has an impact on this perspective providing a rating scale of children's materials according to the greater or less inclusion of different realities to the traditionally visualized in this type of texts, and giving as a result levels ranging from invisibility to neutrality as extreme points, through the clear discrimination, friendly discrimination and affirmation.

Also, this author raises a number of questions that we must ask when analyzing any document (novel, film, text book...):

- Are there different forms of love and sexual intercourse? Are they presented in a positive way or as something negative and reprehensible?
- Are there different models of masculinity and femininity?
- Men and women are presented as the same? If it is not, is questioned that inequality?

Following these approaches, we understand the need to make visible different types of affective and family groups in the literature and in school, as a reflection of the diversity of a society that aims to educate on tolerance.

2. Literary texts at the school. The early readers

Following this dynamic of visibility and invisibility, it will be interesting to see the degree of presence of emotional realities different from the traditional ones in the readings proposed by the educational centers for early readers, since we have a new filter, in this case of the centers, to the presence of literary works already previously filtered by authors (who arise -or not- determined limits when writing their stories), by publishers (who decide what is published and what not) and even by the library professionals (Tofiño (2006, p. 84).

Teresa Colomer indicates that "children's literature considers these situations from a progressive perspective, to provide readers ways of understanding and acceptance of these lifestyles" (Colomer, 2010, p. 151). The question now is where has arrived in literature for children and young people proposed in schools the presence of these forms of life and affection, starting from the premise that rightly expresses Iñaki Tofiño (2006, p. 86) "to assume that the affective and sexual diversity must form part of the usual landscape of our society and that there are certain statements and positions that are no longer appropriate".

Finally, we must remember that the treatment of the affective and sexual diversity we propose is similar to authors as Bartolomé Pina (2008) consider necessary to develop in the classroom the positive assessment of the linguistic and cultural diversity, facilitating real visibility and empowerment of minorities.

3. Approach to study. Process and results

As we proposed in the introduction to this work, we have conducted an analysis of literary works for early readers, and in particular of children 5 years old and first cycle of primary education, that use 10 public and concerted schools in the Valencian community. The schools have been chosen in order to show different

geographical and socio-cultural realities (some schools are located in Valencia city, others in medium size populations from L’Horta and El Camp de Túria regions; other centers are located in the so-called central regions). Although we have analyzed literary works in both public and concerted centers we will carry out a small reflection on the conclusions from the finding in some cases of clear preferences for publishers, authors, themes and family models.

In relation to the works which constitute the corpus, 160 in total, we have not made any separation or difference for reasons of language (Catalan or Spanish), but we have divided them into different groups according to their content. Thus, we have books/materials/tales to work the phonological awareness, non-narrative works, traditional stories or versions (including works by authors with a strong intertextual force with classical or traditional works) and children’s narrative works completely current creation. So, we will achieve the results:

3.1. Material to work the phonological awareness

We have found some collections that respond to these characteristics. It is a material that presents all the letters as a short tale with the intention students learn them and at the same time start reading progressively. They are stories in which the plot is not too significant. We could highlight *Animales son muchos y no iguales* (Animals are many and no equal) by María Luisa Carvalhar, “Xup-xup” collection (Salvatella); and also “Primeres lletres del Micalet” (“Micalet’s first letters”) (Bromera).

In this type of literature remain family groups and traditional gender roles. In some cases appears the father character performing domestic tasks, but if we take into account the peculiar characteristics of this type of work in terms of the plot, it is logical to provide not much more information related to the objective of the work (with the exception of the very interesting field of the paratexts, which exceeds the objective of this research).

3.2. The non-narrative works

We will carry out a less thorough analysis because of their intrinsic characteristics. This group, with respect to the whole of the works analyzed, constitutes the minority, by far. We have not found any examples of theatrical work, so our assessment will be limited to poetic works. We highlight *Versos al sol* (Verses to the Sun) by Empar Lanuza published by Tàndem (a classic in Valencia schools), and on the other hand there are several poetic works by Gloria Fuertes (*Cuentos de risa* – Tales of laughter -, *Versos fritos* – Fried verses - or *La Biblia en verso* –The Bible in verse -, all of them published by Susaeta). As we advanced, few evaluations we can carry out from these works because of the objective of our research, although it calls the attention the fact that in the case of Gloria Fuertes, schools have overlooked titles which highlight in much more direct way, aspects related to the subversion of traditional roles and the gender perspective (for example, *Las tres reinas magas* – The three wise women – or *Cuentos de animales* – Animals tales – in which there are very interesting examples in order to make female sex more visible).

3.3. Traditional and classical tales

The schools tend to propose adaptations or versions of several contemporary authors that do not reflect too many changes with respect to original works, In this sense, the schools maintain a conservative/traditional trend that could be justified by various reasons which in any case is not part of the objective of this study and therefore we will not quote here. As examples of adaptations of classics we have *Little Red Riding Hood* (Combel) or the collection “Vull llegir” (I want to read) (Cruilla) that includes titles as *Puss in boots*, *The steadfast tin soldier*, *Snow white*, *The Bremen musicians*, a total of 50; *Pinocchio* (Anaya) and titles with intertextual references to classics such as *Dónde está mi Tesoro* (Where is my treasure) Gabriela Keselman (Alfaguara), *El loro de Robinsón* (Robinson’s parrot) by Gómez Yebra (Everest) and *En busca del Tesoro del pirata* (*Pirate Treasure Hunt*) by John Leary (Combel). In these last three, it should be noted the association of the male characters with the adventure and action, as well as the practical absence of women (except Brutilda, in *Dónde está mi Tesoro*).

3.4. Narrative works of contemporary authors

In this group we find various works with a wide range of topics. For example by Kalandraka publishers, *Orelles de papallona* (Butterfly ears) by Luisa Aguilar, *Neda-que-neda* (*Swimmy*) by Leo Lionni, *La talpeta que volia saber qui li havia fet allò en el cap* (*Vom kleinen maulwurf, der wissen wollte, wer ihm auf den kopf gemacht hat*), by Werner Holzworth, *El Conillet Blanc* (The White Bunny) by Xosé Ballesteros (adaptation) or *Camila la cebra* (Camila the zebra) by Marisa Núñez.

However, as we have been stressing, the most present familiar figure in the analyzed texts is the mother, often with stereotyped roles (she cares about waking the main character up in the morning, cooking, cleaning); thus, in *Se vende mamá* (Mother for sale) by Care Santos (SM) there is not another figure but the mother, as occurs in *Una hora en el baño* (An hour in the bathroom) by Anne Deás (Montaña encantada), in *Aquel lunes* (That Monday) by Catalina Fiaré (SM) and in *Día de lluvia* (Rainy day) by Ana María Machado (Alfaguara). In all these cases, we are debating if we are in front of single-parent family structures or if it is a nuclear family in which the father works and is the mother who does all the housework. We find the same structure in *Los besos mágicos* (Magical kisses) by Juan Carlos Chandion (Alfaguara), although there are much more abundant texts with a family composed by father, mother and the main character (or with the main character and a brother or sister): it is the case of *Óscar sabe muchas cosas* (Oscar knows many things), by Daniel Nesquens (Everest), *El valiente Teo* (The brave Teo) by Erhard Dietl (Alfaguara), *Espaguetis para Susana* (Spaghetti for Susana), by Peta Coplans (Alfaguara) and *Hermana por sorpresa* (Sister by surprise) by Elisa Mantoni (Everest). Some of the titles that deviate from the usual are, for example, *Vamos todos a viajar* (Let's travel) by Catarina Cardoso (Everest), *Señora de los mares* (Lady of the seas) by Ana María Machado (Everest), or *Pon un elefante en tu piso* (Put an elephant in your flat), by Jorge Werfeli (Everest).

Thus, also in the current author studied literature, family structures tend to present a classical composition (father, mother, son, daughter); a couple of titles present the father as the main character (although almost never alone); in some cases we can see a grandfather or grandmother and in a good number of titles do not appear references to the type of family of the protagonist. In other cases the presence of the mother is general and stereotyped, and it is unclear whether there are more members of the family unit.

4. Conclusions

- In general, most of the works correspond to what we have classified as works of contemporary authors, although a significant percentage of the corpus (30%) are versions of classics or works with a strong charge of intertextuality with these. To a lesser extent (15%) are non-narrative works and texts to work phonological awareness. As to the date of publication, only 15% of the works are younger than two years old. The vast majority (60%) were published between 2000 and 2010, and a significant 25% are from the 1990s or earlier. Conclusions on this point about the inertia or the need for renewal in the titles are obvious.
- There is a more or less disguised permanence of the discourse of domesticity in a large number of works studied. In many cases we find as a central axis the relation mother-main character; however, it is difficult to know if we are looking at single-parent families: we are inclined to think that it is an indefinición which leaves to the imagination of each one the family structure and in many cases can prevent problems.
- Many of the works present didactic guides in which diversity work is included, although this is limited to cultural aspects or capabilities, and not gender, type of family or sexual option.
- In the case of the classics, there is a tendency to maintain the traditional tales using little “risky” versions. Similarly, in many cases we work with texts that are here long ago and that it is necessary to study from another perspective: in this sense, we follow Judith Butler (1990) when she defends the resignification (and derived use) of the obsolete models, rather than their ban or abandonment.
- Despite what was said above, it should be noted some examples that are interesting, both in what refers to affective and personal relationships, as the role of women and gender roles in general. In some cases, family structures and the various relationships are present in a diffuse way.

- There is an important gap between the election made by public schools and the concerted ones. In this respect it is worth mentioning the presence of some texts with remarkable religious and ideological charge, and also the reiteration in the use of works of certain authors and publishers, which lead us to ask ourselves questions about the criterion choice of titles.
- It is noted, once again, the difficulty of introducing some topics or some affective-sexual realities either by the inertia of the educational institutions, for ideological reasons, fearing the pressure of parents, etc. It would be interesting to be able to give the word to these members of the educational community. This issue, together with the investigation of the paratexts are no doubt two of the future lines of work.

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