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The Content of Children'sStories About the World – An Educational Perspective

ABSTRACT

The author of the present article analyzes children's stories about the world. The aim of the research was to answer questions about the content of stories created by six-year-old children. Two groups of research problems were formulated, which took the form of questions. The first group focused on recognizing the subject of children's stories, their characters and events. The second group was related to answering the question of how reality is represented in the situations created by children, taking into account the category of space in terms of near-far. The subject of the research wasthe texts of 40 stories about the world told by six-year-olds. The descriptive category was made up of the 'situation' in which events and characters were placed in the stories. The stories of the children included subjectively perceived situations. These are representations of states of reality, events, and ways of characters' behaviour. Content analysis was used as a method. The results of the conducted analyses indicate that the stories of girls and boys differ in the ways they depict the presented situations, topics, descriptions of events and the background for the ongoing actions. The analysis shows that children focus on positive content related to pleasure and play. The dominant themes are those that capture the characters' unusual features, their activity and rivalry. Children also take up subjects related to travelling, adventure, threats,

and also to the demonstration of strength or fighting. Recognition in the examined scope will be conducive to the optimization of activities in the field of designing the educational environment of the youngest.

Introduction

According to *Wielki Słownik Języka Polskiego*[*Great Dictionary of the Polish Language*], a story is "a tale/history told by a person" (Dereń, Polański 2008: 572). *Wielki Słownik Poprawnej Polszczyzny (PWN)*[*Great Dictionary of the Correct Polish Language (PWN)*] specifies that it is "a story about something" or a tale "about someone/something" (Markowski 2006: 717). A story can be transmitted orally in verbal messages taking the form of, e.g., monologues (narratives). Such a story about something can be a story about events, but also about various states of reality, including actions and physical and mental states (Bokus 1991: 15, 20). The events referred to in the story may concern real or fictional realities (Bokus 1991: 15). The literature indicates that a story that takes the form of a narrative allows us to answer questions related to the event: what is this event (what happened?), who is involved in the event (who is it?), at what time it happened (when?), and where it appears (where?) (Bokus 1991: 15; Shugar, Bokus 1988: 20). Other elements that are characteristic of stories and allow one to distinguish them from, e.g., descriptionsare also pointed out. For example, the nature of the event itself, actions occurring within the events, or situations caused by the action are listed here (Bokus 1991: 15-16). Books on the subject also stress that the creation of stories by children is a creative form of their verbal (linguistic) activity, which develops intensively in the preschool period (Bokus 1991: 15-19; Shugar, Bokus 1988: 21; Uszyńska-Jarmoc 2003: 41-47). In this type of activity, language plays a triple role: it is an object of cognition, a tool for communication, and material for the child's activity (Uszyńska-Jarmoc 2003: 47). It is, therefore, a triple challenge for a young narrator, who, in the course of his or her activity, may encounter difficulties of an intellectual, social and/or linguistic nature (Wood 2006: 137). The protagonists of children's narratives are living beings (with human qualities) (Bokus 1991: 16). Children decide for themselves what the content of their stories will be like. It turns out that their preferences in this area are changing. The research carried out in the second half of the last century showed that children over the age of 5 choose characters taken from other messages (oral and literary messages, films) as the protagonists of their stories, while younger children refer to their own experiences in this respect (Bokus 1991: 19). Preschool children often borrow themes from fairy tales or events from their family life (Shugar, Bokus 1988: 22). Conversely, the dominant issue of children's stories focused on negative content and concerned topics related to

violence against children, with different forms of child abuse (Bokus 1991: 20). The literature of that period indicates that children between 2 and 10 years of age also chose topics related to "strength", "courage", "rivalry", and "feelings of danger" (Shugar, Bokus 1988: 21). The aim of the present text is to try to answer questions about the content of the stories of six-year-old children.

Research procedure

In children's stories, we can distinguish *reference situations*, described as "states of reality which are spoken about and for which available language resources are organized" (Bokus, Więcko, Zamęcka 1992: 128). The literature on the subject indicates that the situational context is always embedded in the cultural context (Kosowska 2018: 53). In previous research, a descriptive category in the study of children's stories was said to be made up of a 'situation' in which events and characters were placed in a specific space and time[1] (cf. Kosowska 2018: 51). Such an approach allowed the children to structure dynamic phenomena and processes by verbalizing them and locating them in a specific event. The children's stories included a subjectively perceived situation, which took into account both the events and the ways of behaviour of the protagonists (actions and internal states) as well as the context in which they were placed (cf. Kosowska 2018: 51, 55; Bokus 1991: 27-28). The research material of the present article consists of the statements of six-year-old children – their stories about the world. The subject of analysis was the texts of 40 stories, comprising22 girls' and 18 boys' stories. In the adopted research procedure, children were to draw the world and say something about it (cf. Woynarowska-Sołdan, Woynarowska 2017: 64). The statements appeared during and after the drawing. Whenmaking their statements, children could refer to their artistic creations. This allowed the author, on the one hand, to focus the child's attention on the task and to strengthen memory by referring to the artwork and verbalizing the presented content. On the other hand, it became possible to document subjective situations which, in the child's opinion, were important and reflected in the story being created. From the content of the child's statements, several categories were identified as the basis for more detailed analysis and interpretation. The basis for their distinction was the way in which the presented reality was shown in near-distance spatial categories, both real and imagined by the child. The direction of

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[1] A similar technique is indicated by Magdalena Woynarowska-Sołdan and Barbara Woynarowska in their guide Przedszkole Promujące Zdrowie. Poradnik dla przedszkoli i osób wspierających ich działania w zakresie promocji zdrowia [Health Promoting Kindergarten. The Guide for Kindergartens and Persons Supporting Their Health Promotion Activities], who emphasize that in the 'draw and tell' technique, which they use in the study, drawing should be treated as a pretext for verbal statements (conversations) (Woynarowska-Sołdan, Woynarowska 2017: 64).

the analyses was determined by the scope of understanding the examined categories. Finally, three categories were distinguished as the basis for content analysis: the world that is close to the child – "the world here", the world that is far away – "the world out there," and the world that exists in a general sense – "the universe."

The aim of the research was to specify the content of children's stories about the world, and, more specifically,

a) what is their subject matter and what characters and events occur in them?

b) how, in the situations created by the children, is reality represented against the background of the distinguished spatial categories?

The analyses were carried out with reference to "the world here", the world perceived in the long term as "the world out there," and the world perceived in a general sense as the "universe". In each of the presented ranges, the focus was on the following content elements: who or what was presented; how someone or something was presented; and what event was presented. Moreover, all the analyses were conducted in a situational context (sometimes they also included a cultural context). The material subject of the analyses was a part of a wider project, and it was used only to the extent to which it allowed the author to achieve the aim of this study. The research method was content analysis (Babbie 2009; Silverman, 2009).

Children's stories – research results

With reference to each of the distinguished categories ("the world here", "the world out there," "the universe"), we can notice different features in the children's stories.

The world presented in the girls' stories shows both people and animals and other beings, including some elements of the material world. The themes are presented against the background of the beauty of nature – trees, gardens, plants, various animal species, etc. Among the characters, the foreground is occupied by people from the girls' closest surroundings – family members. Therefore, these are people known to the girl from her experience. Animals, fictional characters, as well as elements of the material world become the protagonists of the stories and acquire the characteristics of living and thinking beings. The world close to the girls called "the world here" was presented in an atmosphere of joy, happiness and general prosperity. Only in one case was it presented in a negative light as dirty and unpleasant, but, at the same time, with a concern for a better image in the future. The events in the girls' stories are presented against the background of the characters' actions or people close to the child or other children, but not exclusively. As a rule, they are presented against the background of colourful descriptions of the natural world, interiors, and architectural objects. Creations of this kind are dominated by the theme of nature, and the protagonists are also

characters associated with nature. Most often they are animals (butterflies, squirrels, ladybirds, ponies). "The world here" is reflected in stories about ways of life, feelings, joy and happiness. Girls also express concern for their surroundings and care for its nice, aesthetic appearance. Such attitudes are typical of the protagonists in all the girls' stories, as well as specific cases related to creating the image of objects or places.

"The world out there" in the case of girls also uses the subject of nature. In their stories, the girls refer to the topography of a given place, taking into account the configurations of the shapes and colours of this world. They also show the dynamics of changes taking place in the world ("from the trees leaves sprinkled on the lakes, the leaves turned into islands connected by bridges"). This category is dominated by stories about distant places and about activities: the activities of people, animals and other characters situated "out there." Their subject matter also refers to the specific features of living in different parts of the world: on different continents, or in different surroundings. The richness and diversity of the natural world perceived in itsphysical and natural sense is presented. Such a world, although distant, is not presented in an indifferent way. Girls indicate that it is a "happy"place for the beings living in it.

The "universe" as a category, referring to a very distant world, is seen through the prism of adventures taking place in dark scenery. In their stories, girls refer to both the imagination and the content of media messages. Ultimately, their creations become a combination of contrasts and opposites known from the world in which they live every day. This applies to a specific combination of objects, but also to activities and states. An example of these kinds of "associative sequences" (cf. Bokus 1991: 25) is a combination of a spacecraft with a ladybird. The role of the link between the objects in the created story is played by the ability to fly as a specific feature distinguished by the girl and arbitrarily considered by her as important, and thus reflected in the created sequence of events. Both the spaceship and the ladybird, according to the author of this story, fly, and that is what she considers most important. The ability to fly itself is in no way different if we compare the 'flying objects' mentioned above. What is more, in this story about adventures in space, a spaceship and a ladybird can even rival and compete with each other atflying.

In the boys' stories, all of the distinguished descriptive categories ("the world here", "the world out there", "the universe") are characterized by dynamics (cf. Bokus 1991: 21).[2] For six-year-old boys, it is important to present the action taking place and the characters involved in it. The content of the boys' stories related to "the world here" includes actions with the participation of super-powerful characters who use

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[2]   As Barbara Bokus emphasizes, the dynamics of a narrative text are related to its plot, understood as a sequence of related events. Accordingly, the text will be more static when it is dominated by descriptions of situations, people, or backgrounds (Bokus 1991: 21).

fast vehicles, machines and technologically advanced equipment. It is the author who decides how, in what situation and in what context they will be used in the story. The use of the characters' special powers is visible when solving problems related to, e.g., games, fights or other competitive strategies. In relation to "the world here," the boys describe events that happen in places they know from their everyday life (an apartment, a block of flats, an elevator, the local grocer's, a road or a pavement in front of their block of flats). Just like the girls, the boys describe events against the background of nature. In their stories, they take into account the world of plants and animals. However, a clear difference in the subject matter should be noted. The boys refer to what they like and what they are most interested in. This could be, for example, an event involving fastcars, drivers in various roles (driving a race car or a truck, admiring nature, listening to the singing of birds, or the noise of the wind). The stories of the boys and their subject matter indicate that contrasts are taken into account in this kind of creation with reference to, e.g., the size of an object, the characters' strength, or the power of a device. The large size, weight and power of a truck, its huge wheels and tyres can be juxtaposed with a small worm living underground and its delicacy.

"The world out there" in the boys' stories is both real and unreal. The dominant themes in this area are travelling, the adventures of earthly and extraterrestrial beings, leadership and armed attacks. The stories are presented through the prism of events, actions taken by the characters, and background descriptions of the actions taking place. The boys are most willing to talk about travelling to their favourite places (cities, countries, continents, lands) as well as about travels taking place in the virtual world, for example in a computer game. They show the specific features of the lives of the inhabitants of such places, the exceptional powers of the characters, and the extraordinary properties of things. The dominant theme is the involvement of various characters (people, animals, creatures, warriors, aliens) of the story in a fight. Thus, there is also the theme of good and evil, freedom, and peace, or the lack of it (e.g. in the context of the inconveniences associated with imprisonment).

From their perspective, "the universe" is the category that most often includes the products of imagination. Fantastic stories about adventures taking place in the sky, disasters and the destructive actions caused by 'force majeure' dominate these stories. The subject matter also includes violence and war. The background of the actions is different in this case. The place for the events is space, and the background for the presented adventures are planets, the moon, and spaceships. The protagonists of the stories are people, stars, planets, or the crews of flying objects (rockets, satellites).

Summary and conclusions

The results of the analyses indicate that the most popular categories for six-year-old children's stories are those relating to the more distant world. The children's stories are built on their knowledge, personal experience and imagination. They refer to situations known from their everyday life or, on the contrary, created in their minds. The child, when faced with the creation of a story, is confronted with the need to provide the content of the situation and create a framework for telling the entire story. This situation becomes a space for actions, events, states of reality and characters' behaviours. The research shows that the content of children's stories covers both objective and subjective aspects of the world perceived in the near and long term. Clear differences appear in giving meaning to particular elements of reality that make up the image of the world presented in the story. Each child tells a different story and does so in his or her own way. The content of the girls' and boys' stories is also different in terms of the categories called "the world here," "the world out there" and "the universe." The source of this diversity lies in the individual experiences of the children, their interests, and the environments in which they live. Taking into account the gender category, one can see that the content of children's stories becomes a reflection of the world of girls or the world of boys. Differences are marked within the subject area but also within other elements, such as the type of activities and events presented, the quality of the descriptions used, or the way the content is presented (tempo, dynamics of action). The results of the conducted analyses indicate the variability of the subject matter of children's stories in the cultural context over time. The protagonists of children's stories usually include characters invented by children themselves, i.e. not necessarily known from the real world or from the world created in the media. In the majority of cases, they focus on positive content, addressing the topic of happiness, satisfaction, pleasure and fun. The presented problems related to fighting and violence are usually the background for actions and the source of stimuli and fun. The content of such stories is different compared to other stories undertaken by children addressing, e.g., the problems of child abuse. However, the topics related to the extraordinary strength of the characters, their power, courage and rivalry remain the same. Also, catastrophic themes are still present (cf. Bokus 1991).

As a final reflection, it should be emphasized that the stories the child listens to help him or her to organize his or her personal knowledge about the world and their relations with it. They also help them to create their own stories, situations and events (Hryniewicka 2019: 46-47). The creation of stories by a child is a very important activity for him/her, which, at the same time, reflects his/her needs and abilities. Recognition in this area gives us the opportunity to organize the best possible conditions for learning and facilitating the development of contemporary children.

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