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Children's Literature and Education in Values: Self-Esteem as the Basis for a Resilient Attitude

Literatura dziecięca i wychowanie do wartości:
pozytywna samoocena jako podstawa
budowania rezyliencji

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

Values education, Self-esteem, Psycho-emotional stories, Resilience, Children's Literature

In the context of diversity in the classroom, it is becoming increasingly important to teach values that can help our pupils and students to achieve their full personal development. In response to a reality in which pupils are confronted with controversial and even conflicting situations, values-based education is seen as an ever more pressing need.

Having made this affirmation, it only remains to determine the most appropriate method to provide value education in a classroom context. Given that children's literature represents a strategy that is increasingly being used due to its many benefits, the authors propose that education in values should be based on stories, more specifically stories that we may refer to as "psycho-emotional", since they encourage thinking of a personal, introspective nature.

The introduction into the school of stories that can form the basis for values education and, more specifically, help to build self-esteem, may be key to developing a resilient attitude in response to the personal problems that pupils might face. This may be particularly true at the infant and primary education stages.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

wartości, wychowanie, edukacja, samoocena, narracje psycho-emocjonalne, rezyliencja

ABSTRAKT

W kontekście różnorodności, z jaką spotykamy się w klasie szkolnej, coraz ważniejsze staje się wychowanie do wartości, które może pomóc uczniom w osiągnięciu pełnego rozwoju osobistego. W obecnych realiach, gdy coraz więcej uczniów napotyka kontrowersyjne, a nawet konfliktowe sytuacje, dostrzegana jest paląca potrzeba edukacji opartej na wartościach. Po stwierdzeniu tego faktu pozostaje tylko określenie najbardziej odpowiedniej metody wprowadzenia wychowania do wartości w kontekście zajęć w klasie.

Ponieważ korzystanie z literatury dziecięcej stanowi strategię przyjmowaną coraz częściej ze względu na wiele korzyści wychowawczych, autorzy proponują, aby wychowanie do wartości opierało się na tekstach literackich, a konkretnie na narracjach, które można nazwać „psycho-emocjonalnymi” – zachęcającymi do refleksji o charakterze osobistym, introspektywnym. Wprowadzenie do szkoły opowiadań, które mogą stanowić podstawę wychowania do wartości oraz przyczynić się do budowania poczucia własnej wartości, może być kluczem do rozwijania postawy rezyliencji w odpowiedzi na problemy osobiste, z którymi muszą zmierzyć się uczniowie. Wydaje się to szczególnie istotne już na etapie rozwoju przedszkolnego oraz edukacji podstawowej.

Children's literature and education in values

The starting point for this article is the firm conviction that our education system has a pressing need for values education, and that this subject should not lose the interdisciplinary, cross-curricular nature that such a formation requires within the overall educational framework. This affirmation rests on the idea that it is impossible to forget in a 21st century education that, apart from the theoretical and instrumental aspects that revolve around the very concept of education, we are faced by the need to form our pupils in personal and emotional aspects that will undoubtedly help them to develop as individuals.

To this must be added the importance of language, the word, as a means of transmitting not only facts, but also knowledge and experience of life and all those elements that, directly or indirectly, interplay in the learner's formation. With this point in mind, our discussion begins at the point where these two aspects converge. Education and, more specifically education in values and language, are in themselves key elements to understanding how full personal development can be achieved.

It is in this context that we can affirm that children's literature opens up a huge field of study before us that enables us to develop this education in values, and also provides a highly appropriate method for the implementation of values education in the classroom, whether in the context of different subjects or within the framework of what might be a tutorial activity.

Educating in attitudes, and doing so as part of education in values, necessarily entails instilling the capacity to think deeply about what we are like and how we behave or conduct ourselves. This is no easy task, even more so if we remember that it is a process which requires a degree of personal maturity that we do not always find in the pupil. Here, literature can help us. By simply selecting the most suitable stories for each age and subject that we want to work on in the classroom, literature enables us to adapt our teaching material to our pupils' level of cognitive and emotional maturity. A narrative work, a story, can become the mirror in which the child sees themselves as they identify with the characters that appear in the tale, generating a process that can lead to an understanding of situations and possibilities, opening up to them a world of thought and understanding. On this point, we should remember that a story is: "first and foremost, and in essence, a work of art",¹ and as such must by necessity lead to thought and reflection.

Children's literature provides an exceptional method for helping to develop the pupil's personality, particularly once they have achieved self-awareness, going beyond their awareness of the elements that surround them and which also influence their personal development. Family, school, society, culture and so on are all aspects that can influence the pupil's way of being and doing, how they think, what they want. However, the development of their personality, from an anthropological point of view, depends largely on the way in which their personal maturity develops, and this is a matter of greater complexity than it may at first seem.

Our proposal revolves around these preliminary thoughts and focuses on two aspects:

1. The development of education in value, taking self-esteem as a basic value to be fostered in education.
2. Children's literature and, particularly, stories, as a tool for education in values and, particularly, building self-esteem.

¹ S.C., Bryant, *Com explicar contes*, Barcelona 1996, p. 20 (translated by the authors).

Education in values: Self-esteem as the basis for a resilient attitude

To educate is not merely to transmit knowledge and skills that learners should assimilate as quickly and as thoroughly as possible; rather, it concerns the ability to communicate a series of concepts, attitudes and values that pupils make their own, acquiring the maturity they need to grow, to develop, as people. In taking on and performing this task, educators should become aware of the responsibility involved in the very work of teaching, apart from that of imparting the knowledge of different subjects to their pupils.

This consideration has led more than one scholar to speak of the “crisis of values” that has become evident in twenty-first-century society and to assert that education should once more take up the responsibility of educating citizens who are aware not only of their rights, but also of their duties towards themselves and others.

From an anthropological perspective, the very purpose of education should be to help pupils to develop as people, to achieve conceptual and dimensional plenitude. From an ethical and moral standpoint, it is not enough for this development to take place; rather, individuals should grow as people, based on values and precepts that enable them to be and to behave as good people. In order for both these dimensions to blossom, education in values is necessary in order to help pupils find their personal and essential selves.

Parallel to such a process, we find autobiography as a manifestation of this personal development. The way in which each pupil receives the education given to them will shape their personal way of being and of understanding. The peculiar traits of each individual define the diversity of the classroom as a reality that is present in all educational processes. The personal dialogue that each individual should develop with him or herself is crucial to the formation of personal identity.

It is in developing this personal identity that the value of self-esteem becomes particularly important. By self-esteem we mean the value that determines the degree of acceptance or rejection that a person feels towards him or herself. In this respect, we speak of good, high or low self-esteem. The causes of this acceptance or rejection that a person feels towards him or herself may vary greatly, and to prevent either condition from leading to emotional conflict, education in attitudes is essential. At the heart of the matter, education in values means education in attitudes.

In consequence, we take as our starting point the idea that to speak of self-esteem is to speak of the acceptance of oneself. This requires us to be truly aware of what we are, of our skills, abilities, potential and so on, and to be so objectively, without falling into an erroneous acceptance of ourselves, whether through low self-esteem or an attitude of excessive pride and lack of objectivity. High self-esteem is crucial to ensuring

that personal development takes place in a healthy way, with no danger of generating any form of emotional conflict.

To teach or educate in self-esteem is to assist in the development of what we know as intrapersonal intelligence, a concept introduced by Gardner within the context of his theory of multiple intelligences.

At this point, it may be useful to remind ourselves of Howard Gardner's definition of intrapersonal intelligence, which is as follows: "The ability to access one's own emotional life through awareness of inner moods, intentions, motivations, potentials, temperaments, and desires, and the capacity to symbolise these inner experiences, and to apply these understandings to help one live one's life".²

We see, then, that to speak of intrapersonal intelligence is to speak of the self-awareness that a person can achieve, understanding their emotions and, particularly, how to manage their feelings. The goal, as Gardner himself puts it, is to "access one's own emotional life" in order to guide one's own behaviour or conduct. We need to become fully aware of what we are like as individuals, what we want, what skills we have, how we feel in ourselves and so on, to know how to act on the basis of this knowledge, and – what is most important – to accept ourselves in all these different dimensions. In order to effectively develop this type of intelligence, it is essential to know what goals we want to achieve and to decide how to go about achieving them.

Having a well-developed intrapersonal intelligence enables us to gain a real, objective view of ourselves, as well as to appropriately manage all the different factors involved, accepting ourselves within the framework of our abilities and our limitations.

Regulating the emotions, once we have identified them, entails a basic capacity for self-reflection. As Gardner says, the development of good intrapersonal intelligence requires:

- Personal autonomy, accompanied by a capacity for self-management;
- Emotional awareness or, what is the same thing, self-awareness;
- Life and wellbeing skills;
- Emotional regulation or self-control.

These qualities imply and require accurate, objective knowledge of our own personality, our moods, emotions and feelings, and not only this, but also the capacity of self-control, of managing our emotions, accompanied by the ability to ask for help when necessary. Not forgetting, also, that all this must necessarily be reflected in our behaviour.

All this requires a critical spirit, and it is not always easy to be critical. This is all the more true when the aim is to achieve a constructive vision of oneself. The interaction that should be generated within the context of good intrapersonal intelligence

² H. Gardner, *Estructuras de la mente. La teoría de las Inteligencias Múltiples*, Madrid 1994, p. 40.

requires positive interaction between feelings/emotions, reasoning/thought and conduct/behaviour. Intrapersonal intelligence gives us a series of abilities that will help us to *learn to be*, one of the main challenges that the education for the twenty-first century proposed by Delors³ must resolve.

However this may be, there are two basic considerations to take into account in this context:

1. Emotional knowledge is not innate. We have to learn to recognise the emotions, to name and control them.
2. Having an accurate image of ourselves does not automatically mean that we have developed a good level of self-esteem.

That is why intrapersonal intelligence can and, indeed, must be developed and, therefore, must be learned through education. Similarly, self-esteem also needs to be formed in this way.

The development of the more complex activity that is building self-esteem in itself requires the development of good intrapersonal intelligence, accompanied by a mature, willing acceptance of real situations and the way in which such situations should be confronted, focusing not so much on reality itself as on the subject that lives these experiences and feels them in one way or another. It is not so much a question of understanding the life experience, then, but of how we react to the reality that confronts us.

To speak of self-esteem is to speak of self-evaluation. Evaluating oneself implies being aware that:

1. We possess a personal capacity, understood as “I can”. This positive feeling about ourselves enables us to tackle problems.
2. We have a personal worth that we can understand as “I am worthy”. This affirmation enables us to comprehend our own personal dignity and, therefore, to become aware of our right to be happy.

If we consider education as the search for our final purpose, which is none other than our personal development, we see that both of these aspects are indispensable if people are to achieve a full education.

As we have said, this process of self-evaluation, the materialisation of the development of self-esteem, requires a degree of personal maturity that the individual does not always possess. We are capable of making an accurate self-evaluation when and only when we become aware of the “self”. That moment marks the beginning of a path that will lead us to react to failure in positive ways.

All this and, particularly, the “learned” ability to accept and deal with one’s own reality is what enables us to adopt a resilient attitude to life itself and to our own life and

³ J. Delors, *La educación encierra un tesoro. Informe a la UNESCO de la Comisión Internacional sobre la educación para el siglo XXI*, UNESCO1991.

personal circumstances. The strength to confront difficulties is the fruit of personal maturity, well developed intrapersonal intelligence and firmly-grounded self-esteem.

These are qualities that can help to form a resilient attitude to the many difficulties that a child may encounter in the not-so-distant future.

It is in this context that the figure of the teacher, as coach and educator also in regard to attitudes, acquires an important role. The teacher plays a key role, not only as a person, the model that the pupils will encounter on a day-to-day basis, but also because it is his or her task to find strategies to provide this education in values. It is in the search for these strategies that we find the idea of using children's literature and, more specifically, narratives and stories. Stories are useful tools, both for transmitting knowledge and for encouraging others to undertake an emotional self-assessment of themselves. The themes of these stories are many and varied, and they are not only enjoyable, but are also of great educational value.

Children's literature and, particularly, stories, as tools for education in values and, especially, forming self-esteem

To speak of children's literature is to speak of narratives that can be presented in an oral and/or written form and which the young find particularly interesting. At this point, we should make a distinction between children's literature understood as an artistic, entertaining activity, that is to say, purely as a manifestation of art through words, and children's literature understood as a resource for connecting with young people's interests, motivations, concerns and so on.

Building on these ideas, we can identify the characteristic qualities of children's literature, particularly the use of language to represent a reality that children can grasp, that can stimulate their creativity and enable them to gain insight into different situations which, as they use their imaginations, lead them to understand personal and experiential facts and realities.

Among the different forms that children's literature can take, stories, usually in the form of short narratives, are generally the most suitable as the base, not only for enjoyable activities, but also for transmitting knowledge and experience. Due to their simple structure, comprising the introduction of the characters, the situations and conflicts that they encounter, the way that they confront these situations according to their attitudes, and the conclusion of the story, they are generally easy to use in the classroom, both in infant and primary education.

As we can see, then, the story, thanks to its brevity and enjoyable qualities, combined with clear educational value and pedagogical usefulness, is an excellent tool in the development of education in attitudes. At this point, among all the educational

values that stories may have, we should like to highlight those that permit reflection of a clearly psycho-emotional nature. “These are stories through which we can learn the meaning of human values, the acceptance of roles, of social development: participation, the expression of feelings, etc. They enable children to free themselves of their fears, worries, rivalries and doubts of all kinds. They help them to improve their self-esteem and their interpersonal relationships, to increase their motivation and their self-confidence, to carry out tasks that seem impossible at first glance, to overcome danger, to feel self-confident, to change the way they work and accept challenges”.⁴

We refer here to stories that contain great educational benefits as regards the personality, and which can help young people to confront problems of a personal and emotional nature. These are stories that can help to change the emotional schemes that may at certain moments guide people’s behaviour or conduct.

Many internal and personal conflicts are caused by emotional schemes that are created as a consequence of a lack of maturity, fear, insecurity and so on, all aspects largely typical of childish immaturity. Changing such scheme may be crucial to achieving a better emotional state, developing good intrapersonal intelligence and encouraging self-esteem.

The starting point in this complex process is an awareness of what is happening. Recognising a lack of self-esteem merely or feeling the need to work on developing this value in class can provide a good *entry point* for introducing such stories into the classroom dynamic. Presenting and discussing the situations described in psycho-emotional stories may result in the introduction of new information that makes the listener aware of possible emotional schemes that they have adopted and which are really dysfunctional schemes that limit them and cause them to have an erroneous image of themselves. This is when it becomes necessary to restructure one’s own emotional schemes.

Stories provide a good tool for this purpose. Firstly, they enable the focus of attention to be taken away from the subject themselves, enabling them maintain distance from themselves, to take a more objective view. Observing how they act, how they show themselves to others, how they communicate their feelings, their wishes, their fears... Moreover, this also enables the focus to be placed on their interior, at the moment when they feel their own emotions, gradually recognising them even if they are unable to name them. All this, as a result of their identification with characters or situations presented in the story, and in which they may see themselves reflected.

The key lies in achieving awareness, because it is only once we become aware that the will to change can emerge. For this change to become possible, one must look at

⁴ R. Molina Prieto, *Los cuentos ayudan a crecer*, “Revista Innovación y experiencias educativas” 2008, no. 13, p. 8, translated by the authors.

oneself with love, not criticism. The goal is to present a reality that can become a driver for change in the person who identifies themselves with the situation, while at the same time suggesting possibilities for changing the situation itself.

This entire process and the story generate indispensable interaction between adult and child. In the classroom context, the teacher's task is to help the child to become aware of their reality, to accept themselves, and to guide their personal growth towards a clear sense of self-esteem, as a result of having reached a state of self-awareness.

Reaching this state of awareness must necessarily be accompanied by the children's reading comprehension and by their understanding of values, as well as the moral maturity that forms part of their development and evolution. Once the child is mature enough to construct his or her own framework of cognitive and emotional reference, stories can be used to provide values-based education that is both motivating and educational. In such education, the pupils do not see values as abstract concepts far removed from reality and their comprehension, but represented in the experiences of characters in possible worlds that can help them to understand their own worlds and, what is even more important, accept their reality and themselves.

All this entails work whose most evident results will be not only an education in values and, more specifically, the development of self-esteem as a basic value in personal growth, but also an education in resilient attitudes. These attitudes are necessary in order to overcome traumatic situations and to enable learning and growth to be obtained from adverse experiences. In short, the goal is to experience through stories the positive emotions that will help the child to develop his or her personal and emotional strength.

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