Linguaggi creativi e riflessione degli adulti per trasformare la relazione educativa

Creative languages and adults' reflection to transform the educational relationship

Using picturebooks for intergenerational communication
Usare picturebooks per la comunicazione intergenerazionale

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ABSTRACT
This essay based on the opinion that the intergenerational communication is a prerequisite for a harmonic and creative coexistence of all members of a society examines the potential utilization of children's books, especially picturebooks, in the reinforcement of intergenerational relations. It also argues that children's books not only constitute a suitable tool for the reinforcement of the adult-child relationship but also constitute an interesting reading experience for the adult while contributing in a variety of different ways to the lifelong education of both adults and children.

Questo saggio parte dall'idea che la comunicazione intergenerazionale è un prerequisito per una convivenza armonica e creativa di tutti i membri di una società. Il lavoro esamina pertanto il potenziale utilizzo della letteratura per l'infanzia, in particolare i picturebooks, come mezzo per il rafforzamento delle relazioni intergenerazionali. Si sostiene, inoltre, che la letteratura per l'infanzia non solo costituisce uno strumento adeguato per il rafforzamento della relazione adulto-bambino, ma può diventare anche un'esperienza interessante per l'adulto, contribuendo in una varietà di modi diversi alla formazione permanente di adulti e bambini.

KEYWORDS
Crossover children's literature, picturebooks, intergenerational communication, adult education
Letteratura per l'infanzia, libri d'immagini, comunicazione intergenerazionale, formazione degli adulti.

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Visiting books, instead for Introduction

Instead of the introductory comments regarding the issue of this essay which are common in such studies, I would like to begin by telling a story. I would like to tell a story just to give a good example which will show that a story for children is a good tool for the intergenerational communication. Let's see the book written by Mem Fox and illustrated by Julie Vivas, titled *Wilfrid ordon McDonald Partidge,* (1989). This is also the name of a boy, of a small boy with a big name. The boy lives next door to a retirement home and he is a regular and welcome visitor, he is friends with all old people who live there, but his best friend is Miss Nancy Alison Delacourt Cooper, because she has a long name such as his, she has four names as he did. One day the boy overhears his parents saying that Miss Nancy has lost her memory. The boy is confused because he doesn't know exactly what memory means. It is an excellent book and it's important for the children to learn how to behave and interact with older people. After reading it, it also offers the opportunity to both adults and children to talk about it and collaborate and interact to make a list of memories. It is also a good story which shows that adults enjoy reading a book for children.

Another book for young children which deals with the issue of adults' memories but from another perspective is the *Aunt Flossie's Hats (and Crab Cakes Later),* written by Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard and illustrated by James E. Ransome, published in this book, two little girls, Sarah and Susan, visit their Great-great-aunt Flossie. Her house *is crowded full of stuff and things. Books and pictures and lamps and pillows … plates and trays and old dried flowers and boxes, and boxes of hats!* The two girls *pick out the hats and try them on. Aunt Flossie says they are her memories, and each hat has its story*. Her collection of hats has lots of stories. Aunt Flossie goes back in time and revisits her past. She narrates to the girls her memories and stories that each hat brings to her, some of which relate to historical events, such as a big fire in Baltimore. During the narration the reader, either child or adult is encouraged to see the unlimited ways in which an illustrated book can act as an entry point for intergenerational communication It also illustrates how important it is for an effective communication someone to narrate his/her memories and how important it is to ask questions and listen carefully to the answers.

In her book titled *A Day's Work* (1994), illustrated by Ronald Hilmer, Eve Bunting describes in a touching narration the difficulties of an adult in finding a job and especially of a grandfather of an immigrant background named Francisco, displaying an aspect of the adult reality.

A different approach on the labor subject is made by a different, humorous book for young children the *Click, Clack Moo: Cows That Type,* written by Doreen Cronin and illustrated by Betsy Lewin (1999). It begins with the problem of Farmer Brown: *His cows like to type. All day long he hears. Click, clack, moo. Click, clack, moo. Clickety clack, moo. At first, he couldn't believe his ears. Cows that type? Impossible!. Then he couldn't believe his eyes: Dear Farmer Brown, The barn is very cold at night. We'd like some electric blankets. Sincerely, The Cows". Farmer Brown said: "No way! No electric blankets" and the cows went on strike. The left a note on the barn door: "Sorry. We 're closed. No milk today". The next day the Farmer got another note: "Dear Farmer Brown. The hens are cold too. They'd like electric blankets. Sincerely, The Cows"*. The story continues this way until the Farmer is finally forced to negotiate with the farm animals and find a satisfying solution for all of them. Although it is clear that it is a politicized book, what makes it interesting is that it offers a good opportunity to start a conversa-

tion between adults and children about matters of the adult reality. Of course we cannot avoid noticing the intertextual references to the book *Animal Farm* of George Orwell and that the cows' expression "No milk today" refers to the homonymous famous song of Graham Gouldman in this sense it triggers at the same time the adult readers to find their own communication points with the book.

1. Children's literature and adult reader

The books mentioned briefly above offer us a great opportunity to start thinking about the role of children's literature in the creation of opportunities of communication and the empowerment of the relationship between children and adults.

At the same time, they offer us a good opportunity to consider the relationship of an adult reader with a children's book. We should mention, however, that one of the things that sets children's literature apart from the rest of literature is that although it is created for children, the whole process of creation, promotion and distribution of children's books belongs to adults. This discrepancy between the target readership and the creators of the book has fueled many studies. On the other hand, this discrepancy gives the key to providing answers that surround the study of children's literature. Historically speaking, children's literature has shown that the role of adults is not only to control children's texts. In many cases and for a variety of different reasons, it is a fact that many adults enjoy reading children's books. They find them informative and entertaining. All that we have to do is visit Amazon or Goodreads websites and take a look at the readers' reviews to be convinced.

After all, a book for children, with words and pictures, or only with pictures, that speaks about social depravity, homosexuality or the Holocaust can certainly not be a book that addresses only children. Likewise, a book with a philosophical content that deals with the profundities of life, like *How to live for ever* (to mention a title of Colin Thompson book) or a book that reminds us that *You're Only Old Once* (to refer a humorous tile of a Dr. Seuss book) can not be a book that addresses only children. The same is also true of books that draw their material from nostalgic images of the past or from popular myths and infuse them with new or different meanings, often leading to the reversal of truths that we so tenaciously held on to as children. Or, to slightly alter the words of Sergio Tofano, the truths "that belie our expectations".

Many children's books 'speak' to an adult readership. This, coupled with the fact that many of them share a close inter-textual relationship with adult literature, has the recently fired discussion in academic circles. The debate focuses on the facility with which children's literature crosses over to adult literature. It can communicate with both readerships and respond to the emotional, educational, aesthetical and overall needs of both age groups despite the fact that each age group communicates with books in a different way (Beckett, 2009; 2012). The recently invented term "crossover children's literature" assigns a theoretical framework to what we all already knew: namely, that book for children also reach out to adult readers, transcending boundaries and thus broadening its limits. In other words, in the wider sense of the term, it describes literary texts that spark the interest of a wide range of age groups. The reason for this new interest in "crossover literature" is that it has recently been noticed that many children's books address adults and children alike, and it's done on a very conscious level. If one takes into account the thematic content, the complex narrative techniques

and intricate structure and the inherent ideological meanings, one could argue that some children's books appear to have been written more for adults rather than for children.

There are many good reasons that explain why crossover literature is becoming so popular. One reason is the changes in the way people communicate today since the dividing line between what it means to be a child and what it means to be an adult today has become rather unclear (Falconer, 2009: 4). Another reason is the generation of baby boomers born after the Second World War who also played a part in this development (Nodelman, 1995: 92-93). This generation believed that children were far more mature than people had thought them to be. As a result, they had higher expectations of their offspring than ever before. There are quite a number of writers who claim that when they write they do not have any specific age group in mind and that their books are for any person of any age (Shavit, 1999: 89) and so a children's book winds up being 'suitable for adults' as well. Even so, what is important is not so much defining the term "crossover" (as no definition completely covers all parameters) but rather understanding that children's literature, now more than ever, has the power to bring adults closer to the literature of children and in so doing provides them with a splendid opportunity to better understand this phase of a person's development.

2. Crossover picturebooks

The term crossover has been linked to the term picturebooks. Studies by Nikolajeva and Scott (2006), David Lewis (2001), Nodelman (1988), just to mention a few, that look at picturebooks –despite the fact that each study has a different objective– all converge on one thing, namely, that the dynamic relationship between verbal and visual text in picturebooks is what determines the book's meaning. Picturebooks, with the innovative techniques they employ and the intricate dialogue that exists between picture and text not only create multiple levels of interpretation but also defy conventional norms and codes that have traditionally prevailed in illustrated books for children. This has resulted in the creation of a distinctive category of books, the crossover picturebooks. These books with their complex narrative techniques, their use of parody and irony in both image and text, their multiple points of focus, their meta-narratives and their postmodern narration are just a few of the elements that make picturebooks so interesting and captivating to adult readers.

Carol Driggs Wolfenbarger and Lawrence Sipe discuss the reasons why picturebooks are "a unique visual and literary art form" for all ages: "The process of reading these books [picturebooks] requires an active experience of creating routes of reading that account for the tension between words and images, references to related texts and specially located memories and meanings evoked by the text. Unfortunately, many readers leave primary grades with the idea that picturebooks are only for the very young" (2007: 378).

Sandra Beckett who has systematically studied crossover children s literature for roughly two decades now, in her latest study *Crossover Picturebooks: A Genre for All Ages*, notes that "because picturebooks offer a unique opportunity for collaborative reading between children and adults, they empower the two audiences more equally than any other narrative form" (2012: 2; see also Scott, 1999: 101).

3. Picturebooks and adult's training

The recent systematic and methodical study of picturebooks has shown that picturebooks can be used as suitable educational material for the training of both young adults and adults. They present a wide range of possibilities in visual literacy and can stimulate higher order thinking (see Martinez, Roser, Harmon, 2009: 291; Sharp, 1991) because of their social, political, cultural and historical references. Ben Miller and Michael Watts (2011), for example, while searching for picturebooks that could be used in Economics classes illustrate how some of them can be used for college level economics and others for economic units in elementary classrooms. They found that a very large number of picturebooks (which they have listed) cover an equally large number of relevant themes like discrimination, aging, demographics, competition, entrepreneurship, game theory, migration and others. Other studies show that picture books can be used for the teaching of foreign languages to adults and still others can be seen as a perfect tool for rekindling scientific curiosity or illuminating science topics no matter what the age of the learner. They also trigger, in the short time it takes to read them, a deeper understanding of a single concept (Bloem, 2012; Carr, Buchanan, Wentz, Weiss, Brant, 2001).

Each picturebook is different in its own way. Each has its own thematic material, its own ideology, narrative techniques, tone and organization of visual and lexical material. They all promote critical thinking in both children and adults and encourage encoding and decoding skills of visual and lexical messages. Many recently published picturebooks, like the picturebooks that I will consider, "utilize images to create settings that can literally set the plot in a certain surrounding." Their "visual codes also include motion lines, speech and thought balloons and interpictorial words (words that appear inside image, but are not part of the narrative" (Nikolajeva, 2010: 60-61).

Many picturebooks act as mirrors in which the child can get a better look at himself/herself. This is also true of adults. Adults can ponder on their mistakes, their weaknesses or strong points and stand before all that is grand and significant in life. Picturebooks may offer them a chance to rethink their choices and their desires, the futility or the importance of their goals and how they may achieve them. Another important benefit is that adults, as co-readers with children, have a great opportunity to meet up and better communicate with their younger counterparts. In them, they can also find all sorts of interesting topics that deal with modern day life and its problems as the prevalent themes in children's books draw inspiration from a social context: social values, political and cultural themes are all very popular because they aim to help young readers familiarize themselves with the real world that surrounds them while at the same time proposing ways to better cope with it.

4. Picturebooks and intergenerational communication

However, I will not discuss the multitude of ways that picturebooks can be used in adult education programmes. Instead I will comment on specific parts of picturebooks that shed light on the reasons why they may be considered an interesting adult reading experience and a suitable material for the intergenerational communication.

Beginning our brief tour of the world of picturebooks let us pause for a while

at *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* by Maurice Sendak (1993), a book which, in the opinion of many critics, "is no longer a picture book for children." "Jane Doonan writes that it might seem that only adults with a religious background and a knowledge of the Holocaust could make anything out of *Dumps* and that Sendak has produced a picture book for them rather than for children" (Beckett, 2012: 4). Carol Scott in her study "Dual Audience in Picturebooks" poses a rhetorical question: "For who is this book intended?" because if it is for children, she wonders, then "What does Sendak hope to communicate to them? That they are entering a world that does not value them and has no place for them?" (1999: 99). Indeed, *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* is a book that sends out a strong political and highly social critical message by urging adults who read the book to own up to their responsibility for the agonizing reality of the homeless, innocent and abandoned "in the dumps" children, who have to live 'in houses without walls". The pictures dare adults to a take a sharp, critical look at the world of homeless children who are, of course, the victims of an indifferent society. I could say modern society but history has shown us that throughout the ages children have always been subject to abandonment and abuse of all kinds.

In his book, Sendak makes use of two short nursery rhymes to which he incorporates a plot in order to construct his book. Despite the rhymes' gibberish and surrealistic content, he injects them with meaning through his images and in so doing "interprets" them. The few words of the nursery rhymes

> *We are all in the dumps / For diamonds are thumps / The kittens are gone to St. Paul's!/ The baby is bit / The moon's in a fit / And the houses are built Without walls*
>
> *Jack and Guy Went out in the Rye / And they found a little boy/ With one black eye / Come says Jack let's knock Him on the head / No says Guy Let's buy him some bread / You buy one loaf / And I'll buy two / And we'll bring him up*

take on multiple meanings in a rather fraught ideological background (see also Yannikopoulou 2010: 171; Neumeyer, 1994: 30). Many of his pictures are not accompanied by text while others use comic techniques and still others present the text ingeniously embodied within the pictures. The pictures themselves narrate the story of the adventures of the homeless children who live in carton boxes. These misfortunate children are threatened by hunger, poverty and disease while the kittens and a little boy, the "poor little kid" as he is called, are abducted by a gang of Rats –that most probably symbolize adult corrupt power– until they are saved by Jack and Guy and the Moon. The illustrated narration of the book projects urgent social and political issues while the ideological content is shaped by subtle hints that refer to child cancer, aids and the Holocaust (see also Yannikopoulou, 2010: 171; Cech, 1995: 246-247; Neumeyer, 1994: 32-34).

The child reader follows the enigmatic plot and is entertained by the cartoon figures, the rhyming and the surrealistic metamorphoses of the Moon. His/her taste for adventure is sated by the abduction and the pursuing chase. The adult reader will also definitely find interest in the book's meanings as they surface from the sharp sarcasm of the pictures, the exclamatory phrases entrapped in cartoon balloons and the lexical items that are all an integral part of the plot.

The first and most obvious novelty that the reader encounters is the title page which is not at the front of the book but in the back. The cover page shows two little children standing in front of the dark, gaping face of the moon which looks

like a cave's opening. This picture, as Lawrense Sipe points out, is fraught with religious meaning as it is carries influences by Andrea Mantegna's *Christ's Descent* (1996: 97). Some of the children are wrapped up or 'dressed' in the front pages of newspapers where only these printed headlines appear: *Leaner Times, Meaner Times, Homeless Shelters, Children Triumph*. The headlines of the newspapers have a protagonist role in the interior of the book so it may well be that the newspapers themselves convey the most important meaning of the book. The young reader will see that the children use the newspapers to cover their naked bodies and shield themselves from the rain and the wind. The adult reader, on the other hand, will read the headlines and discern the sharp sarcasm: "Housing Units", "Invest in property", "You can afford your own house". The newspapers themselves, once they have fulfilled their promotion of 'investment' programs, are really only good for the garbage dump but they come in handy to the homeless children. The newspapers symbolize the inadequacy of the Press to offer protection to the wretched and suffering people in today's society. Another bitter outcry against an apathetic society is how the "houses built without walls", that is, the carton boxes that the children live in, ironically enough, once contained the products of a good life ("uneeda biscuit", "frozen foods").

Unlike most children's books, the main characters do not return to safety or to a better life after all their trials and tribulations. For them, there is only suffering, uncertainty, abandonment, fear and even the threat of death right through to the end of the book. On the first page of the book s interior, there is a picture of the protagonist, also known as the "poor little kid", who was abducted by the Rats. He could easily be taken for a poor boy from Somalia. If one takes into account the year the book was published, one can argue that this little, naked, dark – skinned boy represents all the poor children of Somalia. That's why Lawrence Sipe notes: "Sendak has changed the most violent image [of the nursery rhyme] 'the baby is bit' from the original 'the babies are bit', presumably to focus his story line and personalize it, as well as to connect the first rhyme to second" (1996: 90).

More and more picturebooks are turning to social themes with a political slant, moral dilemmas, or themes pertaining to our human existence. Sometimes the end of the story is left open, without clear cut explanations or answers, as seen in *We are all in the dumps with Jack and Guy,* most likely because some things can not be easily answered. Other times, there is a feeling of a quasi end, a dangling end, so to speak, whereby the ending of the book takes an unexpected turn or has a twist to it.

A good example of stories with unexpected endings is the collection of a retelling of classic fairy tales in *The Stinky Cheese Man and other Fairly Stupid Tales written* by Jon Scieszka and illustrated by Lane Smith (1992). It would be really interesting reading one of them such as the "The really ugly duckling": *Once upon a time there was a mother duck and a father duck who had seven baby ducklings. Six of them were regular-looking ducklings. The seventh was a really ugly duckling. Everyone used to say, "What a nice looking bunch of ducklings – all except that one. Boy, he's really ugly". The really ugly duckling heard these people, but he didn't care. He knew that one day he would probably grow up to be a swan and be bigger and look better than anything in the pond. Well, as it turned out, he was just a really ugly duckling. And he grew up to be just a really ugly duck. The End.*

Whatever the end may be, what is of more importance in these books is the way they shed light on different aspects of the issues at hand while at the same time encouraging logical associations and a thought-provoking quest for answers.

The Stinky Cheese Man and other Fairly Stupid Tales is a typical example of a postmodern picture book. These retold narratives question their traditional counterparts with metafictive elements that cause havoc to the original organization of the stories while simultaneously parodying them. The reader will encounter a series of humorous twists and turns that defy literary convention and stereotypes in narrative structure.

The narrator is good ol' Jack from *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Jack undertakes the set up of the book. His role is to intervene and make sure that the thread that binds all of the retellings of these classic fairy tales remains unbroken. Things, however, are not always easy for Jack. Some of the heroes mess up his work by appearing where they shouldn't appear. The hasty Little Red Riding Hood begins her story before the reader even reaches the title page. Jack, much annoyed, shuts his ears to the piercing, visually painted red voice of hers and interrupts saying: *Listen Hen – forget the wheat. Here comes the Title Page*. But it isn't just Little Red Riding Hood who plays with the book's entire set up. It is also Jack who moves the endpaper to the interior of the book in order to outsmart the giant: *Shhhhh. Be very quiet. I moved the endpaper up here so the Giant would think the book is over*. And here's something else that's weird. The Table of Contents is found somewhere inside the pages of the book. And if were it only that! In one of the first pages, the dedications are printed upside down. There is a reason for this as Jack explains: *I know, I know. The page is upside down. I meant to do that. Who ever looks at that dedication stuff anyhow? If you really want to read it- you can always stand on your hand*.

Apart from the humorous, crazy set up of the book, the surrealistic content and equally surrealistic rapport of the characters as well as its peritextual elements, all conspire to carry the book to its funny, surrealistic ending. Generally speaking, the book's whole set-up is an exceptional example of the role of peritextual elements in the shaping of meanings (see Sipe, 2010; Sipe, McGuire, 2006; Sipe, 2001). Printing elements such as the characters of the typeface also play a definitive role. They grow, shrink, spread, or fade away. Sometimes they follow a linear pattern while at other times a curved one. In this way, the lexical text also becomes a visual text that each and every time lends a special or additional meaning. When traditionally conventional practices or set perceptions are questioned, old meanings and ideas are infused with new ones. So it is with children's literature. The new replaces the old and the familiar, new dimensions are charted, and different ideologies are formed (Oikonomidou, 2000). As true as this may be, these new perspectives are better understood and appreciated by seasoned readers who have previous knowledge of the original texts of fairy tales as well as of literary conventions as a whole. Even so, young children today are very good at decoding short and multi-meaningful visual messages. This no doubt helps them in their ability to better communicate with picturebooks. For the adult reader, postmodern picturebooks parody popular fairy tales, ones they are very familiar with, within a modern framework. They offer up a wonderful opportunity for them to rethink the same stories in their new dimensional settings and in so doing re-evaluate the world they live in and its conventions (Kanatsouli, 2000).

After reading the book we can discuss with the children and ask them about the obstacles the characters have to face or if they are able overcome them and what choices did they make. We can also discuss the effects of the changes made in the traditional fairy tales and we can cooperate in order to locate the elements, printed, artistic, narrative or other which are responsible for the various shades of meaning of every retelling.

Conclusions

Books for children says Sandra Beckett "read by adults, are often seen merely as 'escapist pap' or an indication of 'the infantilization of adult culture' and the 'dumping down' of culture in general". It would be better she continues to say that instead of talking about the "infantilization of adults to talk about the "adultization of children and young adults" because children's literature is becoming "more adult as children and adolescents become increasingly sophisticated" (2010: 65-66).

Of course, international social and technological changes from the 1960 s onwards have inevitably influenced the content and form of children s books. The advent of television, in particular, had a huge impact on children's literature. Exposure to images through television screens made children and adults alike more aware of the problems and the ills of modern-day life. In a sense, this freed creators of children's books because it enabled them to deal freely with difficult themes that traditionally adults did not want their children to know about. Authors of children's books looked at writing as an innovative, creative practice whereby they could "use complex narrative techniques with more innovation and audacity than authors writing exclusively for adults." This resulted in a quality upgrade of many children's books and a new "very sophisticated style" that drew readers of all ages (Beckett, 2010: 67).

This new "very sophisticated style" owes its existence to the power of picturebooks to defy literary and structural conventions, discover new codes and 'talk to' literary tradition and previous artistic creations as well as to the fact that modern reality offers many levels of interpretation and meaning.

I think it is worth mentioning that in 1986, Theodor Seuss Geisel's celebrated his 82nd birthday with the publication of his new *You're Only Old Once. A Book for Obsolete Children*. On the back page we read:

> *Is this a children's book?*
> *Well … not immediately.*
> *You buy a copy for your child now*
> *And you give it to him on his 70th birthday.*

Of course, he doesn t literally mean it. He means something else: that picturebooks have at least an equal place in any adult's library with other so-called 'adult' books and that they can offer an equally interesting reading experience.

Summing up, I hope that after our "visit" of picturebooks we infer that books for children can offer an equally interesting reading experience for adults and can be used not only as educational material or only as a medium for intergenerational communication, but also as a medium of enjoyment. Moreover children's books can stimulate reflection. In other words, they can make adults think about the different or alternative ways of being and acting in every day life.

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