

READ-ALOUDS IN KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOMS AND THE NATURE OF LITERARY UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract: Storytelling and read-alouds have long been integral components of the preschool and kindergarten programs. Indeed, these practices are supposed 1) to demonstrate to children the value of literature and reading through enjoyable experiences; 2) to prepare children to learn to read through the development of linguistic and cognitive skills. These practices, however, have recently been the subject of controversies highlighting their limits. It has been argued, for instance, that storytime is not a « magical silver bullet »: simply immersing children in good literature will not turn them into readers. On the other hand, the use of literature as a teaching tool is often confined to the simplest aspects of narrative comprehension and seldom gives its due to its symbolic and aesthetic dimensions. It will be shown how these limits can be overcome within a literature-based framework where high-quality, demanding literary works provide the basis for an interactive storyreading program including different kinds of activities.

Key words: children's literature, preschool, storytelling, teaching practices

French résumé. [Translation Laurence Pasa].

La lecture d'album et la lecture à voix haute ont longtemps été des composantes essentielles des programmes de l'école maternelle. En effet, ces pratiques sont supposées 1) démontrer aux enfants la valeur de la littérature et de la lecture par des expériences agréables; 2) préparer des enfants à l'apprentissage de la lecture par le développement de compétences linguistiques et cognitives. Cependant, ces pratiques ont récemment été sujettes à des polémiques accentuant leurs limites. On a discuté, par exemple, le fait qu'immerger simplement des enfants dans la bonne littérature ne suffit pas à les transformer en lecteurs. De plus, l'utilisation de la littérature comme outil d'enseignement est souvent confinée aux aspects les plus simples de la compréhension narrative, laissant de côté ses dimensions symboliques et esthétiques.

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Cette contribution montre comment ces limites peuvent être surmontées dans un contexte didactique où des travaux littéraires de haute qualité fournissent la base pour un programme interactif comprenant différents genres d'activités.

Portuguese resumo. [Translation Paulo Feytor-Pinto]

Contar histórias e ler em voz alta há muito que são parte integrante dos programas do pré-escolar e jardins de infância. Com efeito, é suposto estas práticas 1) mostrarem às crianças o valor da literatura e da leitura através de experiências agradáveis, e 2) prepararem as crianças para aprenderem a ler a partir do desenvolvimento de competências linguísticas e cognitivas. Estas práticas, porém, foram recentemente alvo de controvérsias que realçaram as suas limitações. Tem-se argumentado, por exemplo, com o facto de o tempo para as histórias não ser uma “bala de prata mágica”: a simples imersão de crianças em boa literatura não as torna boas leitoras. Por outro lado, o uso da literatura como ferramenta de ensino confina-se, muitas vezes, aos mais simples aspectos de compreensão da narrativa e raramente tem em conta as suas dimensões simbólica e estética. Mostraremos como estes limites podem ser ultrapassados dentro de um quadro baseado na literatura em que obras literárias exigentes e de alta qualidade constituem a base de um programa interactivo de leitura de histórias que inclui diferentes tipos de actividades.

Polish. Streszczenie [Translation Elzbieta Awramiuk].

Opowiadanie bajek i głośne czytanie od dawna stanowią integralny komponent przedszkolnych programów nauczania. Powszechnie uważa się, że te działania 1) demonstrują dzieciom wartość literatury i czytania poprzez przyjemne doświadczenia; 2) przygotowują dzieci do uczenia się czytania poprzez rozwój lingwistycznych i poznawczych umiejętności. Praktyki te stały się jednakże ostatnio przedmiotem kontrowersji podkreślających ich ograniczenia. Przykładowo, argumentuje się, że czas przeznaczony na czytanie bajek nie jest “magicznym srebrnym pociskiem”: po prostu samo otoczenie dzieci dobrą literaturą nie przemieni ich w czytelników. Z drugiej strony, traktowanie literatury jako narzędzia uczenia ogranicza się do najprostszych aspektów rozumienia narracji i rzadko udaje się ze względu na jej symboliczny i estetyczny wymiar. Wykażemy, jak powyższe ograniczenia mogą być przewyżczone w trakcie pracy opartej na literaturze, kiedy wysokiej jakości, wymagające dzieła literackie stanowią podstawę interaktywnego programu czytania obejmującego różne rodzaje aktywności.

Greek. Περίληψη. [Translation Panatoya Papoulia-Tzelepi]

Αφήγηση ιστοριών και φωναχτή ανάγνωση εδώ και καιρό αποτελούν αναπόσπαστα στοιχεία των προσχολικών προγραμμάτων. Πράγματι, αυτές οι πρακτικές, υποθέτουμε ότι α) δείχνουν στα παιδιά την αξία της λογοτεχνίας και της ανάγνωσης μέσω ευχάριστων εμπειριών, 2) προετοιμάζουν τα παιδιά για την κατάκτηση της αναγνωστικής δεξιότητας μέσω της ανάπτυξης γλωσσικών και γνωστικών δεξιοτήτων. Όμως αυτές οι πρακτικές έγιναν τελευταία αντικείμενο αντιπαράθεσης η οποία υπογραμμίζει τα όριά τους.

Υποστηρίζεται, για παράδειγμα, ότι η αφήγηση ιστοριών δεν είναι «μια μαγική ασημένια σφαίρα». Με το να βυθίζονται τα παιδιά απλά σε καλή λογοτεχνία, δε σημαίνει ότι θα γίνουν και αναγνώστες. Αφ' ετέρου η χρήση της λογοτεχνίας ως διδακτικού εργαλείου συνήθως περιορίζεται στα απλούστερα στοιχεία της κατανόησης της αφήγησης και σπάνια αναφέρεται στις συμβολικές και αισθητικές της διαστάσεις. Θα καταδειχθεί πώς αυτά τα όρια είναι δυνατόν να υπερπηδηθούν, στο πλαίσιο διδασκαλίας βασισμένης στη λογοτεχνία, όπου, υψηλής ποιότητας, απαιτητικά λογοτεχνικά έργα είναι η βάση διαδραστικού προγράμματος ανάγνωσης αφηγηματικών κειμένων με διαφορετικά είδη δραστηριοτήτων.

German. Zusammenfassung. [Translation IrenenPieper]

Das Erzählen von Geschichten und das Vorlesen sind seit langem integrale Bestandteile von Vorschul- und Kindergartenprogrammen. Tatsächlich sollten diese Praxen 1) den Kindern den Wert der Literatur und des Lesens durch emotional positive Erlebnisse erfahrbar machen und 2) die Kinder auf den Erwerb von Lesefähigkeiten durch die Entwicklung sprachlicher und kognitiver Fähigkeiten vorbereiten. Diese Praxen sind allerdings in letzter Zeit zum Gegenstand von Auseinandersetzungen geworden, die ihre Grenzen aufzeigen. So wurde argumentiert, dass das Erzählritual keine ‘magische Silberkugel’ sei: Kinder einfach in gute Literatur „eintauchen“ zu lassen wird sie nicht zu Lesern machen. Andererseits beschränkt sich der Einsatz von Literatur als Leselehrwerkzeug oft auf die einfachsten Aspekte narrativen Verstehens und wird der symbolischen und ästhetischen Dimension von Literatur nicht gerecht. Es wird entfaltet, wie diese Grenzen durch einen literaturbasierten Rahmen überwunden werden können, in dem

hochwertige, herausfordernde literarische Texte die Basis eines interaktiven Leseprogramms sind, das verschiedene Arten von Aktivitäten einschließt.

Dutch. Samenvatting. [Translation Tanja Janssen]

Verhalen vertellen en voorlezen vormen sinds jaar en dag een integraal onderdeel van het onderwijs aan peuters en kleuters. Het doel hiervan is tweeledig: 1) men wil kinderen de waarde van literatuur en lezen tonen door hen plezierige ervaringen te laten opdoen; 2) men wil kinderen voorbereiden op het leren lezen door het ontwikkelen van linguïstische en cognitieve vaardigheden. Onlangs is echter gewezen op de beperkingen van deze aanpak. Betoogd is dat de aanpak geen “toermiddel” is: kinderen onderdompelen in goede literatuur is niet voldoende om hen tot lezers te maken. Aan de andere kant blijft het gebruik van literatuur als onderwijsmiddel vaak beperkt tot de meest eenvoudige aspecten van verhaalbegrip, en wordt aan symbolische en esthetische dimensies zelden recht gedaan. In deze bijdrage wordt een tekstgericht kader geschetst waarin zeer goede, veeleisende literatuur de basis vormt voor een interactief verhaal-leesprogramma. In het programma krijgen verschillende soorten activiteiten een plaats.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Campbell (2001), the term “read-aloud” is the American expression for the worldwide activity of an adult reading a book to a young child or a group of children. In the United Kingdom, it’s simply called story reading, and in francophone countries, “lecture par l’adulte”. Read-alouds have long been integral components of the preschool and kindergarten curricula. Indeed, these practices are supposed to demonstrate to children the value of literature and reading through enjoyable experiences and to prepare children to learn to read through the development of linguistic and cognitive skills.

However this kind of activity has often been the subject of controversies highlighting its limits. It has been argued, above all, that read-aloud is not a “magical silver bullet”: simply immersing children in good literature will not turn them into readers (Rog, 2001). Among other things, they need to be taught how to read and understand literary texts.

This article will show that there has been, during the last 30 years, a remarkable dynamic of change in the read-aloud formats, which can be best characterised by an always broader conception of what is literary understanding, and then, of what can be considered as appropriate literary meaning-making during read-alouds. We will also consider how read-aloud formats can be influenced by the art of the authors and illustrators themselves.

2. LITERARY UNDERSTANDING THROUGH INFERENCE

At the beginning of the sixties, the way read-alouds were usually led was not very interactive: they were just like storytelling, and a teller is not supposed to be interrupted at every possible opportunity, repeatedly, by the audience. Teachers used to insist on children listening carefully to the story in order to experience it aesthetically, as a unified whole.

Then came the period of the speech liberation movement, even for preschool and kindergarten children. There were authors who began to create rather provocative picture books for them which young children were particularly eager to comment on. It was difficult, indeed, for young children, not to react spontaneously to books

like Sendak's *Where the Wild Things are* or Ungerer's *The Three Robbers*. So, it isn't so surprising that it was just at that time that read-alouds became more interactive. Of course, the claim for more interactivity also had strong didactical reasons, based on literacy concerns, and on literary theories...

2.1 Literacy concerns

In 1966, New Zealand researcher Marie Clay (1967) introduced the term *emergent literacy* to describe the fact that children's literacy development begins long before children start formal instruction in elementary school and this literacy development appears to be nourished by social interactions with caring adults and exposure to literacy materials, such as children's storybooks.

The idea arose that educators could promote children's understanding of reading by helping them build literacy knowledge and reading strategies through the use of engaged learning activities, and, for instance, through more interactive read-alouds by adopting, what I will call, the "reading through inference" format. The prototype of this read-aloud format is probably the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DRTA) of Russell Stauffer (1969). In this kind of activity, children are firstly asked to make meaningful predictions based on illustrations or portions of stories. In a second phase, they read the text or listen to it. And finally, children evaluate their predictions within the context of a discussion. At the end of the discussion, they continue predicting what will take place in the next portion of the story, and so on. This kind of didactical device was developed in many countries under the influence of the works of K.S. Goodman (1967) and Yetta Goodman (1969) about the importance of top-down processes in reading.

2.2 Literary theories

This kind of literacy approach was also perfectly congruent with the conceptions of literary understanding developed in the seventies. For instance, the structuralist Claude Bremond (1966/80; 1973) defined the elementary narrative sequence as a series of three functions corresponding to the three basic stages in the unfolding of any process:

- 1) virtuality (a situation opening a possibility);
- 2) actualisation or nonactualisation of the possibility;
- 3) achievement or nonachievement.

The "reading through inference" activities give the children the opportunity to explore the narrative possibilities, and build literary knowledge about setting, plot, characters, and other literary elements.

We will find the same notions if we take as reference, instead of French structuralism, the phenomenological reception theory of Iser who argues (1976/78) that the "reader's position in the text is at the point of intersection between retention and protension" between the answer to previous expectations and the rise, the formation of new ones. It's interesting to note that the "protension" and "expectations", according to Iser don't only concern the predictions about the continuation of the

story, but everything which is not explicitly contained in the text, *the gaps* the reader has to *fill in* by making inferences of any kind.

Here is an example of inferences on continuation and implicit ideas, taken from the read-aloud *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight cat* (Wagner & Brooks, 1977) in a kindergarten classroom.

John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat is the tale of an elderly widow named Rose whose friend and companion is a dog named John Brown. John Brown is a loyal friend and caretaker for Rose, looking out for her as best he can. One night, Rose thinks she hears a cat out in the garden. But John Brown assures her that it is not a cat. When Rose realizes that there is really a cat outdoors, she cares for it by leaving a bowl of milk outside the front door...

During the interactive read-aloud, the ritual question of the teacher, at this moment, was: "What's going to happen?" And some children said "John's gonna tip the bowl over", and others, "he's gonna lap up the milk". And after these predictions, she turned the page...

Child 1	I was right! He's tipping the bowl over! He doesn't lap up the milk!
Ms V.	Why does he do that?
Child 1	Cause he is naughty!
Child 2	Cause he doesn't like cats. He is a dog!
Ms V.	Well, maybe, but he doesn't go after the cat.
	Why does he tip the bowl of milk poured by Rose for the cat?
	May be he wants to send him a message - say something?
Child 3	Yes, don't come again!
Child 4	You won't receive any food! Beat it!
Child 2	John is jealous! He wants to keep Rose all for himself.

Our corpus (transl. from French) – Children: age 5

We see quite well, in this example, the two kinds of inference children are invited to make, first about story continuation (narrative possibilities) and then about the character's motivations and we see that 5-year-old children are quite able to make these kinds of inference.

3. LITERARY UNDERSTANDING THROUGH INTERTEXTUAL CONNECTIONS

This "inference-oriented read-aloud" format is a rather powerful didactical model, but this doesn't mean that it is the only one we can use and have to use. It is based on a model of literary meaning making which conceptualises the reader's task as following the narrative trajectory of a story by filling in the gaps in the narrative, and it can be argued that it is a rather restrictive conception of literary understanding. For instance, when we read, we constantly link what we are currently reading to what we have read before, and not only to fill gaps: every text or set of signs is a mosaic of references to other texts, and other symbolic works in a culture. It's the principle of *intertextuality*, to use the term coined by Julia Kristeva (1969/1980). Meaning making is more broadly defined here as a process where the reader makes connections as well as disjunctions among symbolic works. Besides, in this concep-

tion, reading is not only considered as a cognitive process, but mainly as a complex cultural practice.

Bernard Devanne (1992-93) showed how intertextual networkings of book sets (“réseaux-thinking”) can enhance meaning making among young and less young children and can encourage them, for instance, to notice the universals that books share, thus promoting the recognition of connections and disjunctions between and among books. I will just give here a short illustration of spontaneous intertextual response during a read-aloud with kindergarten students of Tomi Ungerer’s *Zeralda’s Ogre* (1967).

Zeralda’s Ogre is the story of what happens when a grumpy, child-eating ogre meets a girl named Zeralda, who is a fantastic cook... the story ends with a marriage and lots of kids... The teacher shows the last page, where the Ogre can be seen, beard cut off, with his wife, Zeralda, holding a newborn baby in her arms. They are surrounded by a lot of children (one of them hiding a knife and a fork behind his back...)

- Ms Z.. (Reading) “... And we can imagine that they had a long and happy life.”
The End! Does this story remind you of any other stories?
- C1. Yes, Cinderella!
- C2. Snowwhite!
- C3. It’s more Beauty and the Beast, for me!
- Ms Z. So, tell us why?
- C3. Well, the Ogre became a Prince.
- Ms Z. And not in Cinderella?
- C3. No, it’s Cinderella.
- Ms Z. Cinderella?
- C3. Cinderella, she became the Princess.
- Ms Z. Indeed, you are right. Have all of you already seen the animated Beauty and the Beast? No? I’ll tell you the tale.

Our corpus (transl. from French) – Children: age 5

This vignette must simply remind us that we mustn’t neglect, in intertextual networking, the visual texts and the texts of popular culture, especially motion pictures, and television programmes, because it’s the basic culture of the majority of children (Robine, 2005).

4. LITERARY UNDERSTANDING THROUGH PERSONAL RESPONSES

However, Julia Kristeva used the term “intertextuality” to refer not only to the ways in which written and visual texts were interrelated, but also to the ways they were related to the text of one’s own life, as a collection of various overlapping experiences. Simply said, we may connect the story (or stories) of our lives to the story we are reading. But surprisingly, this broad view of intertextuality did not immediately have the same success as the restricted one, at least until the development of the reader-response models, during the last 15 years. These models focus on the idea that meaning is not found in the text, but is constructed by the reader.

For instance, in Rosenblatt’s (1994/1978) transactional theory of reading, readers are described as transacting with a text, assuming various stances along a continuum. Readers may read in order to take some information away from the text, or to analyse its formal properties; Rosenblatt called this the efferent stance. On the other

end of the continuum, readers may read simply to engage in a lived-through experience of the text, entering the text and experiencing its literary power. Rosenblatt referred to this type of stance as aesthetic. From a reader-response perspective, literary understanding involves the tracing of reader's personal responses and associations with the text. Readers a) may bring their own life experiences to bear in interpreting texts; b) may question the story from their own personal viewpoint. We have here, actually, a major shift in emphasis from the classical text-based approaches to more subjective approaches that focus on the readers.

Here is an example of personal responses from a 4-year-old girl during a read-aloud of *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak (1963).

Max is coming close to the Wild Island and the text says that the Wild Things "roared their terrible roars and flashed their terrible teeth, and rolled their terrible eyes, and showed their terrible claws."

RSE: (To the child) Do you think that you might want to go there?

Child: No.

RSE: Why not?

Child: Because they might eat me up.

RSE: But what if they liked you?

Child: But what if they don't? I don't want to go there 'cause they have sharp nails and they might scratch me. Do you know what? One time when we were at [my neighbor's] house, when I was going up their stairs, their cat bit me!

RSE: Did it scare you?

Child: I cried. She hurt me. She pulled my tights.

Wolf & al. (1996: 482) – Child: age 4

When the child says that she would not like to go to the Wild Island, we can consider that she questions the story from her own personal viewpoint... and her misadventure with a naughty cat gives her an experienced understanding of what a Wild Thing is.

5. LITERARY UNDERSTANDING THROUGH EXPRESSIVE ENGAGEMENT

There are other possible kinds of aesthetic responses doing read-alouds, for instance those recently dubbed by Lawrence Sipe (2002) as "*expressive engagement*". Here are two illustrations of expressive engagement, given by Sipe himself.

The first is called "*dramatizing*". It is a performative engagement where children dramatise the story spontaneously, in nonverbal and verbal ways, during the read-aloud. For example, during the same passage in *Where the Wild Things Are*, when the kindergarten teacher read that the Wild Things "roared their terrible roars...", Joey responded by roaring and curving his fingers and swiping his hand forward. A little later, the children all acted out the wild rumpus scene by doing a spontaneous dance, standing up and shaking their bodies around with their hands in the air. This spontaneous dramatisation demonstrates participation in the story by imitating and physically interpreting what is going on in it.

A second type of expressive engagement is what Sipe calls "*Talking back*" to the story or characters. Here, the world of the text seems to be transparent to the

world of the child. For example, during a read-aloud of Beatrix Potter's classic *Peter Rabbit*, an excited kindergarten child yelled, when Mr. McGregor began to pursue Peter, "Run, Peter! Run for your life!"

We might be tempted to see these two types of response as a disruption of the serious meaning making that is supposed to be the principal activity of the children during storybook read-alouds, however, I agree with Sipe when he considers them as "sophisticated expressive acts of literary pleasure", as expressions of what Roland Barthes (1970/74) called "the bliss of the text", or, as said Bakhtin (1984), the exuberant, carnivalesque enjoyment of stories that takes the readers out of the world of the familiar and into the delightful world of the story.

6. CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS AS "OPEN WORKS"

We see that preschool and kindergarten children can respond to stories in various ways, provided we give them the opportunity to do so. They may understand a story through analysing the narrative possibilities and filling in the gaps about its plot, setting, characters, they may also compare or contrast it to other stories and cultural products they know or to the events of their own lives, they may also show an expressive engagement as readers. And I'm sure that this list of the different possible kinds of response to literature is far from being closed... and this is not too surprising if we accept the definition of literature as "open work" (the *Opera Aperta* of Umberto Eco). This "openness" appears to be an essential part of the true substance of works of art and literature, allowing not only various interpretations, but also different *modes* of interpretation.

7. NEW WAYS OF READING FOR NEW KINDS OF PICTURE BOOKS

As we need to keep paying attention to the demands and evolutions of literature theories, we also need to stay open-minded concerning the demands and the evolutions of the picture books themselves, because they can lead us to adopt new ways of reading, to consider new kinds of response and new formats of read-alouds. I am going to illustrate this last issue with the example of a sequence of interactive read-alouds experienced with 4-year-old-children using David McKee's picture book, *I hate my Teddy Bear* (1982). Apparently, in the terms of Propp, the narrative of *I hate my Teddy Bear* has a very simple circular home-away-home structure:

Brenda's mother comes to visit John's mother, and the children are sent out to the park to play with their teddy bears. They begin to argue about whose Teddy Bear is the best, each trying to top the amazing abilities of the other's teddy, from speech to flight. Then John's mother calls them in to tea and they go home. The narrative has a little coda where the teddies begin discussing aside their abilities. Pink Teddy is surprised to have heard that Blue Teddy can count backwards and Blue Teddy is surprised to have learnt that Pink Teddy can sing. Both admit, however, that they cannot really fly...

This is the story told by the text, but actually, it ignores completely what is going on in the pictures, in the world around Brenda and John. Actually, our young heroes are literally lost in the depth of field of the pictures, so it is difficult for the readers and the viewers to focalise on them, having to face a galaxy of strange objects and char-

acters inside a strange, non-perspectivist space with multiple baselines, folding over, and multiple points of view... How did our young readers make meaning and sense of this strange book?

Practically, we organised 5 read-aloud sessions on this book, one per week for 5 weeks.

During the first session, we showed the pictures to the children, one by one, and asked them to make predictions about the story before reading them each text aloud... But of course they were rather puzzled by the pictures; they were just waiting for the text.

During the second session, we used the same device, and the first concern of the children was to try to remember and memorise the text, literally, including the incidental clauses: "My teddy can fly, *shouted John* – So can mine so can mine, *screamed Brenda*". Usually, children don't try to memorise the text literally, because the pictures give them enough clues to remember the story. But here, the pictures could not help them...

For the third read-aloud session, we decided to read each text to them first, and after that, to let them explore each picture freely. Then, they began to explore the strange space of this picture book eagerly.

It was during the third session, for instance, that they understood that all the people carrying hand sculptures were probably preparing the open-air exhibition seen on the final page. And so, during the fourth and fifth sessions, they tried to identify all the sculptures, miming them with their own hands, labelling them (*the huge white hand, the very heavy hand, the hand of a black man, the green hand, the robot hand, the big glove*, etc.), and doing so, they were able to retrieve these different hands, with pleasure, in the open-air exhibition of the final page.

The story of Brenda and John and the story of the carried hands can be considered as the main narrative strands of the book, because they find a resolution in the final complicity of the teddy bears and in the exhibition, but there are also, in the galaxy of strange characters and objects surrounding Brenda and John a lot of narrative hints that our young readers/viewers were eager to explore in the third session.

First, different recurring characters were identified – for instance,

- the woman wearing a pink dress, who appears first, leaning against a large tree (p.8) , then walking along a pathway with her hands behind her (p.13), and again, sitting on a folding chair (p.15)... Actually (but the children discovered this connection only during the fourth session) she is peeping at the man buying a mouth organ, then she is following him secretly, and finally, listening to him playing his mouth organ...

During sessions 3 to 5, the children were also able to notice:

- the woman with the ball of blue wool and the man consulting a sheet of paper, maybe a map (p.6)... The pair reappears, still with the trailing wool and sheet of paper (p.13). And finally, the woman appears again, but alone: she has reached the end of the ball of wool and is snipping the final bit of it off (p.19).
- There is also the woman with the straining lead, appearing twice (p.6 and p. 20). The children were also able to make logical connections between the glove lying on the ground and – two pages later – the woman with a missing glove (p. 6 and 8), and

between the policeman with the ice-cream cone and the ice-cream seller (p. 4 and 11).

And what about the non perspectivist representation of John's building? Even if young children use multiple baselines in their own drawings, it doesn't mean that they accept this technique as viewers. During the first session, concerning the first picture of the book (p.3) with multiple baselines, the children suggested three kinds of explanation: a) the characters are falling down; b) they are walking on the ceiling; c) the picture is upside-down. These suggestions were repeated during the second session. But the discussion went further during the third session:



"Why don't you go outside and play with your teddy bears?"
said John's mother.

Figure 1. David McKee, *I hate my Teddy Bear*. 1982

- Emilie: They are falling down.
 Raphael: They are walking on the ceiling.
 Sophie: No, the picture is upside-down.
Mrs Robert turns the picture upside-down.
 Sophie: It's still upside-down... You have to turn it up again.
 Raphael: Then they are walking on the ceiling! That won't do!
 Jessica: There is also a stool. A stool can't walk on a ceiling, eh!

- Isabelle: There are two pictures in the same one. He should have done it on another page!
- Benjamin: Maybe he had no more paper or he had to keep it for another book...
- Our corpus (transl.) – Children: age 4

Without a doubt, *I hate my Teddy Bear* belongs to this “new breed” of picture books with nonlinear patterns, and illustrations gaining their independence from the text, which has often been dubbed as “postmodern”... like others such as *Voices in the park* by Browne, *The 3 Pigs* by Wiesner, *Granpa* by Burningham, or *Adele’s Album* by Claude Ponti.

Many researchers who study this kind of “postmodern” books think that their main contribution is to make the gap between fiction and reality explicit through metafictional devices. Here, the use of multiple baselines as well as the inflation of the depth of field where the so-called main characters are drowned can be considered, indeed, as metafictional devices showing readers how representations of reality are constructed: the illustrator is no more hidden behind his drawings, we can see his tricks, which are displayed.

This is true, of course, but, in my opinion, it’s not the whole point of the story. The most interesting thing in this kind of picture books is that we are unable to focalise on a single strand of narrative, and then we can understand that the story, the visual text is full of potentialities, virtualities that can make sense provided we adopt what Freud (1912) called an “evenly suspended attention”. In psychoanalysis, this mode of suspended attention is related to the interpretation of the “free associations” and of the dreams of the patient:

"It consists simply in not directing one's notice to anything in particular, and in maintaining the same 'evenly suspended attention' in the face of all that one hears... For as soon as anyone deliberately concentrates his attention to a certain degree, he begins to select from the material before him... he is in danger of never finding anything but what he freely knows" (Freud, 1912: 109).

For Freud this technique would allow for a greater receptivity and, in my opinion, this is just what children and adults may learn through the reading of such a book: they can learn to adopt an ‘evenly suspended reading’.

8. CONCLUSION

Teachers have a lot to say about what counts as response in their classroom communities. So, first of all, if they want to help their students to approach storybooks as works of art, they need to stay open-minded and to keep paying attention to the demands and evolution of literary theories and to the new artistic forms of picture books.. And secondly, they have to adapt the format of their read-alouds or use a range of follow-up activities in order to stimulate the widest diversity of literary responses. There is indeed a palette, a great range of traditional and less traditional activities allowing this kind of multidimensional didactical approach:

- interactive readings where children can collaborate to construct text meanings and interpretations;

- repeated readings and discussions about personal and critical issues within the stories;
- reading and comparing other books by the same author, about the same topic or a similar character thanks to book sets;
- dramatising the story or parts of the story;
- responding through art and writing...

This just a palette of activities and it's neither necessary nor recommended to run all of them each time one read a picture book with the children... It is for the teacher to select the most appropriate ones for her/his general didactical aims, but also for the specific book to read.

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