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Rethinking about the values transmission in textbooks for children by means of illustrations

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Abstract

The Spanish society has changed deeply during the last decades, and these changes have its reflection in all the social aspects. Textbooks and infantile books are not an exception, and the values that are transmitted by them are extremely important for the integral formation of children and young people. In this respect, illustration has a fundamental role in the creation and modification of social stereotypes, and this must be born in mind at the moment of selecting school texts and complementary readings by teachers.

Key Words

Primary Education; Illustration for Children; Education in Values

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Introduction: The change of values in the new society

Values have always been part of education (educating is definitively transmitting the shared social values to the following generations-Camps, 2007). And values have always formed an inseparable part of books, especially of textbooks and its graphical support, and these were never questioned, since we found the same values in our more nearby familiar and social environment.

But these values have changed deeply in the last decades, and not only in Spain. The concepts of Integration or Multiculturalism have not been common currency in western societies - to which we refer here-. And even less in Spain, since we are referring concretely to our country, so we can assert without mistake that foreign cultures were placed in exotic scenes or historical times, which in good part was reflecting a reality that has changed radically over the last decades. We can see good examples of this in publications such as Encyclopedia Álvarez, The World of the children (Ed. Salvat) and other books of that time.

This document is a reflection on the role of the illustrator as supporter to the text and its commitment with the new values shared within society, which have to be promoted in educational centers, whose teachers also have to 'sign' this commitment with a suitable choice of the books and didactic materials that their pupils will use (Figure 1), and that will be, in a sense, their 'pedagogic commitment' with the families.



Figure 1. A handicaped student share with others a day in the field. Estrella Fages ©, Graciñas, VicenVives (2004). Digital illustration.

Illustration and values in the didactic materials

Without obviating the publishing, economic, political or ideological criteria, which often determine the essential line of the publication, it is undeniable that the illustrator tries to reflect the reality that surrounds them, in a way that a reality which is evolving towards a major diversity, managing to be a multiracial and multicultural society, has also a clear reflection in the evolution of illustration.

Integration as an educational concept and the equality of sexes have also been a way (probably undertaken a bit late in our country) that has been realised in good part in the last two decades. The promulgation of the LOGSE gathered what has been known as 'transverse axes of curriculum' and that nowadays it's known - in a wide sense - as 'education in values' (Medina and Salvador, 2009). Illustration, both simple and complex, both technically good or less good, supported always

these written, more or less explicit values, interpreting the desires of the publisher or those of the author, first under the attentive look of the censorship and later under the sign of what is 'politically correct' (Finn, 1995) (Figure 2). In this respect, the family model always has been one of the 'favourite' topics of illustration, which may have generated several polemics recently, as that of Education for the Citizenship in Spain, which has confronted many parents with the educational system, probably more due to the contents and the graphical support of the textbooks, than due to the official curriculum, as has been gathered in several judicial decisions.

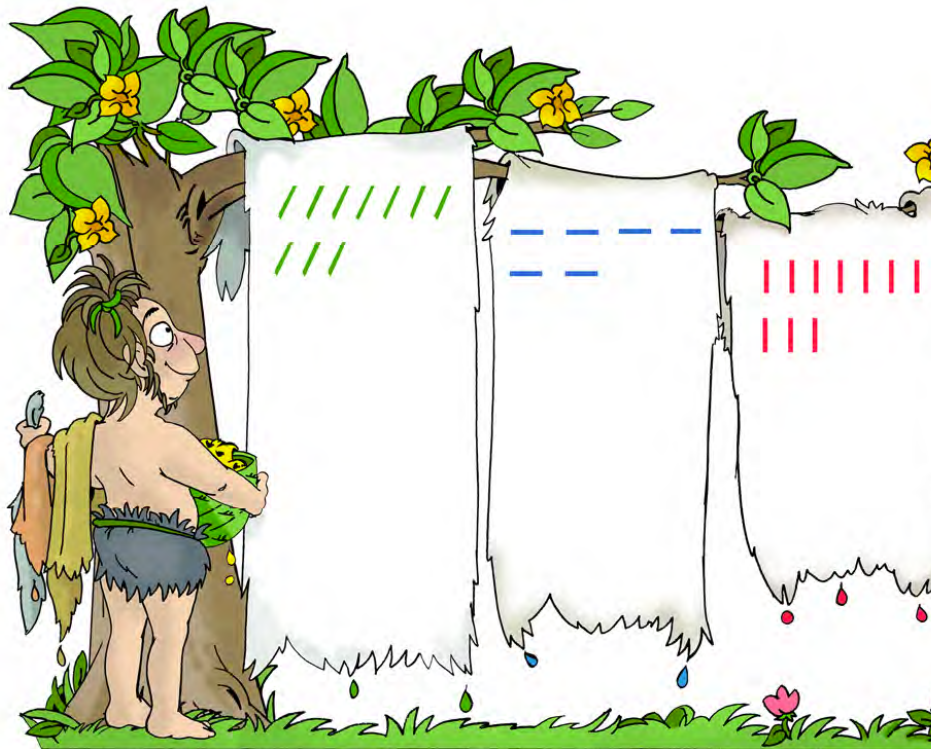


Figure 2. A men in the stone age, helping in the domestic work. Estrella Fages © Oxford University Press (2003). Digital illustration.

More diversity in texts and illustration

But it also is undeniable that who the interpreter – the illustrator, in this case -, is also introducing their own vision, their own perception of the reality that surrounds them and their own desires of transforming that same reality. And this personal vision unequivocally sets its place in the frame of these values, these axes that cross transversely the curriculum and - increasingly more, but not always – that constitute little by little the 'secret curriculum' (Apple, 1986).

In the sense of the previous paragraph, the stereotype and the archetype are elements of work of the illustrator (Figure 3), since they must represent realities and recognisable concepts for the boys and the girls (and also for the teachers). These stereotypes not only refer, obviously, to races and to cultures, but also to the family, sports, work and social icons in general, related very specially to the traditional roles of the man and the woman.

But those symbols that we share in society have also been changing - some of them slower than others - since the beginning of the Spanish transition. We do not place people of other ethnic groups in exotic countries anymore, but selling in the 'street markets' of our cities or attending to us in a drugstore or in a health center. In this respect, the illustrator can and must break the stereotype, and not only reflect the reality that we see day by day, but also give one more step

ahead and represent the same prominent figures in situations in which there could be ourselves, our families or our acquaintances.

The skills that can be activated, on the other hand, by reading a story or a textbook - and its graphical support, which is really important in some cases -, such as the capacity of attention, imagination or the connection among facts and values (Gómez Couso, 1993) force the illustrator, in relation with the previous paragraph, to create a meticulous work in relation with the explicit or tacit values that their drawings could incorporate, and simultaneously promoting the development of the mentioned skills. And in many cases this is not easy at all.

Antonio A. Gómez Yebra



Todos los patos, las gallinas, los cerdos, los conejos, las palomas, los gorriones, y hasta los ratones se reían de mí cuando me quedaba castigado, mirando a la pared.

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Mi amigo Listo

Pero mi amigo, el caballo Listo, los mandaba callar y les reñía. Luego, durante el recreo, se quedaba conmigo para repasar lo que la profesora había enseñado y todos sabían, menos yo.

Yo me sentaba en mi pupitre, él se ponía a mi lado, sin importarle no salir al patio, y me recordaba cada letra, como la había enseñado la profesora.



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Figure 3. Estereotipes: smart horse/ donkey dumb. Estrella Fages © Mi amigo listo, Algaida (2010). Digital illustration.

The commitment of the illustrator with diversity

Reflecting the diversity of the classroom is contributing to integration and to moral development of the students. When there is tuning in among author, editor and illustrator, the diversity populates streets, classrooms, excursions, cities and villages. There are interfering new prominent figures, who now have different skin colours and ethnic groups, different sizes, hair colour and varied clothing.

Pupils who go in wheelchairs walk along the street close to their companions and dogs and cats of the most varied hairs swarm for the corners of the illustrations. Just like the illustrators, of some form, have the habit of represent themselves in their illustrations, boys and girls seek for their own reflection in them, and all of them must be found in these, whatever it is their social condition, their ethnic origin or their capacity or disability (Figure 4).

And they will be happy, enjoying life, because this is a vision of the world, a nice and entertaining vision necessary to share with the readers. On the other hand, when a teacher chooses a certain text or material of work for their pupils, probably they examine the text, the contents, the

expression, the activities and, probably, the illustrations. It is probable that some illustrations seem nice to them, but in time will choose books which structure or contents they consider more suitable.

This, obviously, departs from they work as a teacher, but it would be interesting that, when the didactic materials were examined, the graphical support of these were checked attentively and looked for the work of representation as those valid social values in our context, the diversity that reflects Spain today and the roles of the prominent figures who adjust to that more fair and supportive world that they want to construct.

As interpreters of what the educational teams (authors) and editors present, illustrators must be creators (at least in part) of the tools that are in use in the classes and as such, they must have a personal commitment with those.



Figure 4. Diversity in the school. Estrella Fages © Vives Vives (2006). Digital illustration.

Conclusion

Like teachers have to be critics with the educational procedure and rigorous with the didactic methods, illustrators must also be with the orders of their work, when they interpret those ideas and contents indicated in them. In the process of elaboration of didactic materials, it is necessary to enter the creative and constructive discussion that allows to imagine and to look for a better world where finally every pupil could realise their dreams and demonstrate their skills and their value.

The expressiveness in the gesture, the recreated emotions and the exceeded fantasy, can be important elements in the graphical support of school texts. Probably the laugh, as therapeutic element, could be an essential aim for the illustrator: promoting the smile, infecting happiness, motivating the pupils for reading and study, also form a part of the creator's trade.

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