

## **“Children as Readers of the World”: diversity, class, gender, and participation**

Carolina Gonçalves<sup>1, II</sup>

Catarina Tomás<sup>1, III</sup>

Aline Almeida<sup>I</sup>

<sup>I</sup>Centro Interdisciplinar de Ciências Sociais,  
Universidade Nova de Lisboa (CICS.NOVA), Lisboa – Portugal

<sup>II</sup>Faculté d'Éducation, Université de Sherbrooke – Canada

<sup>III</sup>Escola Superior de Educação, Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa – Portugal

**ABSTRACT – “Children as Readers of the World”: diversity, class, gender, and participation.** The strategic utilization of postmodern illustrated literature has emerged as a crucial tool in facilitating a profound understanding of how children construct their comprehension of diverse perspectives within the realm of social dynamics. This article rigorously scrutinizes children's conceptualizations pertaining to a wide array of subjects, encompassing diversity, socioeconomic disparities, gender dynamics, and active participation. This examination was conducted within the comprehensive framework of the RED\_SMOOTH Project (Horizon 2020, European Union), which involved a qualitative investigation involving a cohort of 22 second-grade primary education students situated in the city of Lisbon. This initiative entailed the deliberate implementation of a read-aloud intervention program, primarily designed to explore the intricate themes under consideration.

**Key words: Children. Post-Modern Picture Books. Read Aloud. Diversity.**

**RESUMO – “Crianças Leitoras do Mundo”: diversidade, classe, género e participação.** O uso crítico dos livros ilustrados pós-modernos tem sido uma ferramenta essencial para a compreensão da construção social do reconhecimento das diferenças pelas crianças. Este artigo analisa as concepções de crianças sobre diversidade, classe social, género e participação. No âmbito do projeto RED\_SMOOTH (Horizon 2020, União Europeia), desenvolveu-se uma investigação de natureza qualitativa, com um grupo de 22 crianças do 2.º ano da educação básica, em Lisboa, com a implementação de um programa de intervenção de leitura em voz alta com vista à exploração dos temas mencionados anteriormente. Os resultados permitem identificar o impacto dos livros ilustrados para promover a discussão sobre estes temas.

**Palavras-chave: Crianças. Livros Ilustrados Pós-Modernos. Leitura em Voz Alta. Diversidade.**

## Introduction

Picture books enable the exploration of different skills and perspectives with children. When used with a pedagogical intent, fostering dialogue, valuing children's voices, and recognising their role as social actors, picture books contribute to the construction of alternative viewpoints and the development of their own sense of justice and equity (Strouse, Nyhout, & Ganea, 2018). Moreover, picture books are cognitively stimulating and carry affective significance. Through these books, children actively interpret these cultural products and incorporate them into their relationships, actions, and reflections on different realities, diversities, and experiences, thereby developing an understanding and appreciation of themselves and others (Corsaro; Molinari, 2000; Costa, 2012; Wild, 2023).

Drawing on the dialogue between the Sociology of Childhood and Educational Sciences, and within the framework of the SMOOTH project—*Educational Common Spaces, Passing through Enclosures and Reversing Inequalities*, funded by Horizon 2020 (European Commission) and the subproject RED—*Rights, Equality, Difference*, a qualitative study was conducted. This study involved the implementation of a read-aloud programme with a group of 22 children attending the 2nd year of Primary School (1st Cycle of Basic Education) at a public school in Lisbon, aimed at discussing diversity, social class, gender, and participation.

The objective of this article is to analyse children's conceptions of these themes and the subjective meanings they experience and attribute through postmodern picture books. The read-aloud intervention programme was conducted with a group of children from diverse and disadvantaged linguistic and social backgrounds, using postmodern picture books as a medium for discussion and reflection on the themes.

Picture books and illustrated albums have increasingly gained a privileged space in the development of literacy skills, although their use in interactions with children could be further reinforced. However, in formal learning contexts, their use is often instrumental, primarily aimed at teaching children to read. Less common are pedagogical practices that promote the use of postmodern picture books to develop more comprehensive work with children, encouraging them to explore and discuss complex social issues—issues that require urgent awareness and an informed, critical stance, with children included in this process. This project dared to establish a dialogue that makes explicit the explicit and implicit intersections of picture books.

## Reading About Equity and Diversity in School

The different dimensions of diversity that characterize the contemporary world need to be reflected upon, addressed, and considered in educational contexts from a multidisciplinary perspective. This approach is necessary to account for both the complexity and breadth of

diversity, as well as the characteristics and specificities of the various social groups that inhabit and coexist within the school environment. Promoting multiple perspectives among children from an early age is an important responsibility of the school, as it helps to prevent and reduce issues related to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination (Morgan, 2009). Openness to diversity, to "a different way of living, perceiving, and understanding the world" (O'Neil, 2010, p. 41), is essential in the current global context. Social equity and access to equal opportunities challenge and confront long-established conventional practices, particularly concerning conceptions of social class, age, gender, and participation. This process involves continuous challenges and confrontations, which constantly question everyone's stance. However, "it is through our own narratives that we construct a version of ourselves and the world" (Bruner, 1996, p. 19).

The Educational Sciences and the Sociology of Childhood have increasingly emphasised the importance of understanding diversity through the lens of childhood cultures, particularly in recognising the central role that diversity and differences play in legitimising social relations. These relations can manifest as both oppression and exclusion, or as emancipation and inclusion, occurring among peers (Araújo, 2007) as well as in interactions between adults and children (Corsaro; Molinari, 2000; Sarmiento, 2003; Wild, 2023).

The social relevance of the RED-SMOOTH project is evident in the increasingly multicultural nature of Portuguese society. This context presents significant challenges, compelling education professionals to confront and engage with a diverse array of children who bring with them varied representations of themselves, the world, and others. The lack of studies in Portugal that address these dimensions—diversity, social class, gender, and participation—particularly concerning children in the 2nd cycle of basic education, lends an innovative character to the project. It critically employs postmodern illustrated books to uncover and understand complex themes. Social relations among children in the early years of basic education are often imbued with issues of power, violence, and discrimination, which are frequently overlooked by adults. Sullivan et al. (2020) note that some adults avoid discussing these topics with children, underestimating their capacity to reflect on such matters. These practices not only obscure how children reinterpret and negotiate these issues among themselves, but also support depoliticised, uncritical, and decontextualised pedagogical discourses and practices.

In Portugal, there is also a growing number of people from various minority groups, highlighting an increasing need to develop intercultural understanding. This understanding can and should be fostered in schools with children using illustrated books that represent people from diverse backgrounds. In this context, such books are not only a useful resource but also enhance knowledge (Morgan, 2009).

Children can recognise and reflecting on issues such as rights, differences, (in)justice, and equity. It is therefore the role of adults to

create opportunities that enable active participation from children, both in discussions and in public actions towards a fairer and more equitable world. An informed, open, contextualised, and critical approach to these aspects in the educational setting aims to look beyond the visible, exploring the meanings behind the actions of children and adults. It incorporates these actions into more critical and informed readings, dialogues, and practices concerning diversity, racism, and discrimination.

When carried out carefully and intentionally, reading books that address topics related to rights, equity, differences, social justice, and others, prompts children to question these subjects. This process stimulates and encourages them to articulate their viewpoints both among themselves and with adults, aiding in a deeper understanding of these concepts. It also helps them develop critical thinking and a reflective mindset, enabling them to formulate further questions throughout their lives concerning social justice and other related issues.

Illustrated books, used during read-aloud sessions, serve as an excellent tool for exploring previously mentioned topics and provide children with a supportive and comfortable environment for discussion. As Norris (2020) argues, early awareness and understanding can indeed be fostered through such interactions. Conversations around diversity, broadly defined in this text, can be focused and positively impactful in enhancing relationships, recognition, and understanding of diversity. Furthermore, illustrated books are not just accessible resources; when children engage with illustrations that depict the emotions, experiences, and lives of characters, they "internalize these situations and build connections to their own lives. Through illustrated books, children reflect on various cultures and experiences, developing a greater understanding and appreciation of themselves and others" (Wild, 2023, p. 734).

## **Postmodern Picture Book**

Historically, books have been instrumental in promoting reading skills and, later, in fostering the enjoyment of reading. Even though the practice of reading for pleasure in educational settings is not always as prevalent as it should be, books have long been seen to explore multiple perspectives. This is particularly true for picture books, which are predominantly aimed at children and youth literature.

In contemporary times, "picture books are a significant source of new language, concepts, and lessons for young children" (Strouse; Nyhout; Ganea, 2018, p. 1). In a brief and objective definition, a picture book can be described as one that features illustrations on each page, which are complemented by text that narrates the same story depicted in the illustrations (Oktarina; Hari; Ambarwati, 2020). Numerous studies (Morgan, 2009; Norris, 2020) highlight the unique ability of picture books to explore multiple perspectives and address issues related to stereotypes and prejudices, making them valuable tools for these purposes.

In recent decades, there has been a proliferation of literary genres, including the post-modern picture book. These genres provide readers with new ways to make sense of their reading experiences. Post-modern picture books often serve as an invitation or challenge for educators, teachers, and readers to consider fresh perspectives and novel approaches to literary exploration (Ciecierski; Nageldinger; Bintz; Moore, 2017). Additionally, the combination of text and images in these books offers children enhanced stimulation and understanding, enabling them to learn not only from the text but also from the illustrations (Morgan, 2009).

Several different definitions have been attributed to this genre of book; however, there are some elements of consensus: “a post-modern picture book is one in which a traditional story or plot is interrupted to present an alternative viewpoint or outcome, often in a way that questions the validity of conventional norms and leaves much of the meaning to the reader” (O’Neil, 2010, p. 43). Whereas previously children’s literature was used by educators, teachers, and families to convey social values and entertain children, contemporary post-modern picture books challenge this practice by encouraging readers to question and rethink the social norms conveyed by earlier children’s literature. In these earlier works, social classes and roles, gender, as well as stereotypes and prejudices, were presented as fixed models (O’Neil, 2010). On the other hand, post-modern picture books offer the potential for “contradictory interpretations.” While they seemingly seek to disrupt the status quo, post-modern picture books also “represent our cultural identity and beliefs, not transmitting dogmatic ways of being and believing as in the past but stimulating readers to question and reconsider social norms” (O’Neil, 2010, p. 41). Furthermore, post-modern picture books expose children to complex narrative language, thereby better preparing them for the subsequent understanding of reading and the world around them (Bus; Anstadt, 2021, p. 1).

It is also widely agreed that the nature of this book format captures the attention of children and readers of all ages (Ciecierski & Bintz, 2015), facilitating both intra- and intergenerational dialogue and the exploration of cross-cutting themes such as social justice, racism, discrimination, gender issues, and social class. Furthermore, these books are relatively brief and visually sophisticated, which allows children to both discover and understand the world they live in, particularly when addressing issues pertinent to their daily lives and contexts, especially for those from disadvantaged or culturally diverse backgrounds. Through post-modern picture books, children see themselves represented in these narratives and are also challenged to reflect on “different human experiences, confronting imaginary and real worlds” (Wild, 2023, p. 733). For children from diverse cultural backgrounds, picture books can serve as mirrors, enabling them to see their own heritage or culture affirmed and celebrated. Additionally, picture books can act as windows for all children, offering them glimpses into lifestyles and experiences that differ from their own (Husband, 2019).

## **Reading Aloud as a Pedagogical Strategy for Effective Listening to Children**

Reading aloud is not only a means to foster a love of reading but also a fundamental activity for knowledge construction and the development of more complex syntactic structures. It is a strategy that requires the implementation of various approaches to progressively cultivate critical reading skills in children, both now and in the future.

When teachers read aloud, they model fluent reading, stimulate dialogue, enhance comprehension, and facilitate vocabulary acquisition among children. This practice allows children to experience the expressiveness of reading, including elements such as breath, rhythm, intonation, flow, and pauses. In the context of this study, expressiveness is considered for its communicative potential, as it can assist in the integration of children from different linguistic backgrounds (Freitag & Sá, 2020). For instance, some children in this study come from Brazil or Portuguese-speaking African countries. Furthermore, reading aloud captures the attention of all children, regardless of their reading proficiency, due to the inherent expressiveness of the activity (Hoppe, 2022).

In the current context, it is crucial for children from disadvantaged and/or culturally diverse backgrounds that the moments of reading aloud, prepared by the educator or teacher, address pertinent issues of social justice (Norris, 2020). These sessions should create a space where children can discuss such topics under adult guidance, while maintaining an openness for each child to express their views and feel heard and acknowledged.

Reading aloud sessions present an opportunity for educators to use illustrated books with a pedagogical intent, thereby maximising the potential of this resource. Such sessions can also enable children to learn about alternative perspectives and broaden their understanding of social and cultural justice and equity (O'Neil, 2010). Prior preparation of questions and/or activities related to the topics to be discussed from these books allows for a more targeted facilitation of the reading aloud session. At this point, "the teacher's responsibility is to guide the children in the discussion and be prepared to answer any questions they might have. [...] The teacher's questioning should be intentional. Open-ended questions will encourage children to expand their thoughts and ideas" (Norris, 2020, p. 185).

According to Morgan (2009), interactive read-aloud are one of the most effective strategies to employ, as skilled educators and teachers know how to select passages from books that will engage children and those that lend themselves to deeper discussion on certain topics. "Interactive read-aloud foster the construction of meaning as children respond personally and interpersonally, interacting with the text, their peers, and the teacher" (Wild, 2023, p. 734). By pausing during the reading and engaging with the children, educators ensure that these topics are understood and discussed within the group (Morgan, 2009). This

strategy also promotes critical thinking, allowing children to listen to and consider each other's perspectives.

## Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative methodology and was conducted between December 2022 and June 2023, adhering to the research procedures involving children (Ferreira; Tomás, 2022). The research was carried out with a group of 22 children enrolled in the second year of primary education. Data collection occurred at different stages: (i) the implementation of the read-aloud intervention programme over a period of 6 months; (ii) both participant and non-participant observation; and (iii) the conduction of three focus groups, with the first and second groups consisting of 4 children each, and the third group comprising 5 children.

Ethical principles were also considered, including confidentiality, anonymity (the school's name was concealed, and the children were given fictitious names), and privacy, which were addressed during the informed consent process. The children volunteered to participate in all activities and interventions proposed by the research team. However, the selection of the group to participate in the SMOOTH project was made by the school's administration. As a result, the classroom teacher was required to participate in the project without prior consultation. This may also explain some of the resistance encountered by the research team, both in the implementation of this project and in other activities promoted by the team.

In the context of the SMOOTH - *Educational Common Spaces, Passing through Enclosures and Reversing Inequalities*, funded by Horizon 2020, and the subproject RED - *Rights, Equality, Difference*, it was crucial to identify and analyse the children's conceptions of the key categories inherent to the RED subproject, as well as their subjective meanings experienced/attributed through illustrated books.

Finally, it is essential to clarify the pathways and choices made to understand the analytical axes and categories imposed by the researcher on the voices of children and teachers (Spyrou, 2018). Although initial categories were defined, which led to the identification of central analytical axes derived from the objectives of the RED-SMOOTH project, their refinement resulted from fieldwork dynamics. This included the available books, children's interest in them, and their suggestions<sup>1</sup>, leading to the delineation of the following categories: 1. Diversity; 2. Social Class; 3. Gender; and 4. Participation.

## Context and Participants

The research was conducted in a primary school within a TEIP (Educational Territories of Priority Intervention) school cluster, located in a Lisbon area characterised by gentrification, touristification, and marked by significant socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic, and educational diversity. The focus of the intervention with this group of children stemmed from the context and the lack of literacy practices by



the class teacher. In the classroom, the children did not have direct access to children's literature books, and the few available, with restricted access for the children, did not meet the necessary quality for developing literacy skills. This aspect was also crucial in selecting this type of intervention with the children, given that the context did not provide the minimal conditions for developing reading skills. Although we hoped that, after the classroom was equipped with high-quality children's books, the teacher would continue to promote these strategies and activities, the ongoing presence of the research team on-site confirmed that there was no change in the pedagogical practices of the class teacher.

In this study, twenty-two children participated, comprising 13 boys and 9 girls, aged between 6 and 8 years old, who were enrolled in the 2nd year of primary education (see Table 1). The children come from disadvantaged social backgrounds and exhibit linguistic and cultural diversity. The teacher of this group is 44 years old, with 10 years of experience in the profession, including four years as a teacher in this school cluster.

**Table 1 – Summary Characteristics of the Children Group**

	Boys	Girls	Assessment in Portuguese Language Discipline	Total
6 years old	Manuel <sup>1</sup>			1
7 years old	Afonso <sup>1</sup> Samir Rafael <sup>1**</sup> Eugénio <sup>1**</sup> Caetano <sup>1</sup> Lucas <sup>1</sup> Gonçalo <sup>1</sup> José <sup>3*</sup> Joaquim Denis <sup>1</sup> Paulo Cristiano <sup>1</sup>		Good Without data Very good Sufficient Sufficient Very good Very good Without data Good Sufficient Good Sufficient	19
		Valentina <sup>4</sup> Madalena <sup>1</sup> Helena <sup>5**</sup> Natália <sup>1</sup> Teresa <sup>1</sup> Diana <sup>1</sup> Mariana <sup>1</sup>	Good Sufficient Sufficient Insufficient Sufficient Very good Insufficient	
8 years old		Sofia <sup>1</sup> Juliana <sup>5**</sup>	Very good Good	2
Total	13	9		22

Underlined names: children who participated in the focus groups. <sup>1</sup>Portuguese; <sup>2</sup>Pakistani; <sup>3</sup>Nigerian; <sup>4</sup>Venezuelan; <sup>5</sup>Brazilian; \* Native Language Portuguese; \*\* Variety of Portuguese. Source: Elaborated by the authors.



Although most children are Portuguese nationals and have Portuguese as their mother tongue<sup>2</sup>, there is a poor command of the language of instruction. The results of "insufficient" in Portuguese for Portuguese children - Natália and Mariana - highlight this weakness. At this stage, children are generally able to read, although some may do so hesitantly.

### **Presentation of the Intervention Programme – Read-Aloud**

The read-aloud intervention programme, as previously mentioned, was designed for and with children in the second year of primary school. Its aim was to explore their conceptions of different realities, diversities, and experiences that are part of their daily lives, as well as how they understand and appreciate themselves and others (Costa, 2012; Wild, 2023).

Through read-aloud sessions, the programme sought to promote social justice and a sense of community within the group of children by integrating "identity, diversity, justice, and action." By fostering dialogue, "valuing the voices of the children and affirming their role as agents of change," it was possible to highlight the children's understanding of social justice (Wild, 2022, p. 733).

### **Before the Intervention: Preparation of the Read-Aloud Programme**


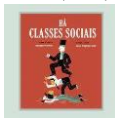



Before the implementation of the read-aloud programme, a period of observation lasting approximately five months was conducted. This allowed us to understand the characteristics and dynamics of the specific group and to establish more egalitarian interactions between the researcher and the children. This observational phase also provided insight into the children's preferences for play, their leisure activities, and their general worldviews. As Spyrou (2018) asserts, to deeply appreciate the social and cultural significance of children's voices, researchers must become familiar with their discourses. Therefore, the immersion was crucial for drawing parallels between everyday school situations and the stories during read-aloud sessions.







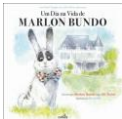
Despite this preparatory period, during the intervention, as interactions between the children and the researcher became more established, the selection of books continued to be adjusted. Throughout all readings, the children were encouraged to engage in activities (Norris, 2020) related to the text being read. On some occasions, they made drawings in their notebooks or included excerpts from the stories in their diaries. They were also allowed to re-read the book and ask questions whenever they wished.







## During the Intervention: Read-Aloud Sessions

The intervention programme, which lasted for 6 months, included sixteen read-aloud sessions, each approximately one hour long (see Table 2), and involved various activities with the children.

**Table 2 – Read-Aloud Programme Outline**

Date and time of session	Book(s) <sup>3</sup>	Category	Number of children and adults
06/12/2022 1 hour	Book 1: <i>Cá em Casa Somos</i> (Isabel Minhós e Madalena Matoso, 2009) 	Diversity	13 children, researcher, and teacher
13/01/2023 30 minutes	Book 2: <i>Há classes sociais</i> (Equipo Plantel, 2016) 	Social class	6 children and researcher
18/01/2023 1 hour	Book 3: <i>Não faz mal ser diferente</i> (Todd Parr, 2006) 	Diversity	10 children and researcher
23/01/2023 1 hour	Book 4: <i>O livro do Pedro</i> (Manuela Bacelar, 2008)  Book 5: <i>Os de cima e os de baixo</i> (Paloma Valdivia, 2009) 	Discrimination Homophobia  Social class	7 children and researcher

30/01/2023 1 hour	Book 6: Os vestidos do Tiago (Joana Estrela, 2016) 	Gender	7 children and researcher
28/02/2023 1 hour	Book 9: Estrelinha (Nuno Castelo, 2023) 	Social class	3 children and researcher
	Book 10: Todos fazemos tudo (Madalena Matoso, 2011) 	Gender	
09/03/2023 1 hour	Book 11: O protesto (Eduarda Lima, 2021) 	Participation	5 children and researcher
	Book 12: É assim a ditadura (Equipo Plantel, 2017) 	Participation	
21/03/2023 e 22/03/2023 2 hours	Book 13: O Jaime é uma Sereia (Jéssica Love, 2020) 	Gender	13 children, researcher, and teacher
30/03/2023 1 hour	Book 14: Um dia na vida de Marlon Bundo (Marlon Bundo e Jill Twiss, 2018) 	Gender	14 children, researcher, and teacher

18/04/2023 30 minutes	Livro 15: <i>A surpresa de Handa</i> (Eileen Browne, 1994) 	Diversity	5 children and researcher
10/05/2023 1 hour	Livro 16: <i>Eleição dos bichos</i> (André Rodrigues; Pedro Markun; Larissa Ribeiro; Paula Desgualdo; 2018) 	Participation	13 children, researcher, and teacher
15/05/2025 1 hour	Livro 17: <i>Como pode ser a democracia</i> (Equipo Plantel e Marta Pina, 2017) 	Participation	9 children, researcher, and teacher
24/05/2023 1 hour	Livro 18: <i>Menina bonita do laço de fita</i> (Ana Maria Machado, 1986)  Livro 19: <i>Orelhas de borboleta</i> (Luisa Aguilar, 2008) 	Diversity  Diversity	3 children, researcher, and teacher
07/06/2023 30 minutes	Livro 20: <i>A pequena semente</i> (Eric Carle, 2020) 	Participation	22 children, researcher, and teacher

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Books were introduced based on the children's interests, with two or three different books presented for each session<sup>4</sup>. The researcher would sit in a circle with the children, show them the cover of each book, read the title, and together they would choose which book they preferred to be read aloud. Books that were not chosen for that session

could be read later and/or were made available for the children to read independently if they wished.

Children's participation in the read-aloud sessions was always voluntary. Either the researcher or a child would do the reading, while the other adult<sup>5</sup> attended to the remaining children, who could choose to engage in other activities. Children could opt out of participating in the reading if they wished, though this did not happen when readings were conducted with smaller groups. There were instances when children participated attentively in the read-aloud sessions only as listeners, and later approached the researcher to discuss or ask questions about a particular book.

### **After the Intervention**

At the end of the intervention, focus groups<sup>6</sup> were conducted to help the children identify similarities between themselves and the characters in the stories, exploring shared characteristics, experiences, and emotions. Simultaneously, the questions aimed to encourage the children to explore the differences between themselves and the characters, highlighting aspects that set them apart and thereby fostering reflection on their own identity and worldviews.

In some of the books examined, understanding the time and place where the story occurs, including the physical, social, and cultural environment, was explored to contextualise the narrative and identify connections to the children's reality.

The focus group questions also aimed to understand the obstacles, conflicts, or difficulties the children identified in relation to the characters in the story, encouraging discussions about overcoming challenges, empathy, and problem-solving. Comparing the story's setting with the children's real lives fosters a critical analysis of the differences and similarities between the two, enriching the understanding of the work (Norris, 2020).

Questions regarding whether the protagonist has companions or support individuals stimulate a discussion about the importance of social support and its potential influence on life trajectories. Imagination and reflection on how they would act in certain situations lead the children to put themselves in the place of the Other, in this case, the characters, promoting empathy and understanding of the narrative choices. By considering how to support someone facing circumstances like the main character's, the children are encouraged to reflect on empathy and solidarity.

## Presentation and Discussion of Results: What the Children Read

### *Diversity*

Given the fact that the group is notably heterogeneous, and the school is in a neighbourhood also characterised by linguistic and cultural diversity, this dimension becomes a part of the children's daily lives. The children are aware of the diversity around them and the aspects that distinguish them. This is exemplified by the following testimonies:

Sofia: It is exceptionally good to be different!

Valentina: If we were all the same, no one would know who was who!

However, the recognition and acceptance of cultural diversity often centre on a biological dimension of human beings.

Researcher: Look at the people in this room; do all the children and adults have the same colour?

Denis: José does not.

Juliana: Madalena does not either.

Gonçalo: That does not matter because everyone has the same blood; people can even be pink.

Another topic addressed concerns the physical diversity of human beings and their own abilities, which can sometimes lead to discriminatory behaviours among children. This aspect is, within the educational context of this study, perhaps the one that most needs to be worked on/deconstructed from an early age to promote an understanding of differences among and by children.

From the reading of the book *Cá em Casa Somos* [At home we are] (Book 1), the children explored and shared the diversity of bodily signs based on the marks on their own bodies, highlighting the natural diversity among people, where everyone has unique characteristics. The children's willingness to share their marks demonstrates an openness to diversity and a readiness to interact with differences in a positive and respectful manner.

They also noted other physical differences such as height and visual ability, particularly through the reading of *Não faz mal ser diferente* [It's Okay to Be Different] (Book 3) and *Um dia na vida de Marlon Bundo* [A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo] (Book 14), where illustrations depict characters with different body sizes and/or who wear glasses.

The reading of *O livro negro das cores* [The Black Book of Colours] (Book 7) allowed for an exploration of visual impairment and learning. The discussion following the reading about blind people learning the alphabet through touch highlighted the importance of inclusion and adaptation to ensure that all children, regardless of their visual abilities, have access to education and the right to learn.

Eugénio: “But why does it have these things?” [referring to the embossed/Braille features in the book].

Madalena listens attentively and says: “So they don't read, they feel, it's different.”

Eugénio: “But then, when blind people are born and go to school, how do they learn the alphabet?”

Researcher: “They learn to feel with their fingers right away, as Ema said.”

José, listening to the conversation while drawing, says: “I thought blind people could only listen, they don’t read!”

José’s comment reveals a stereotype he held about blind people, and the discussion about this book demonstrates how stereotypes can be questioned and deconstructed.

### *Social Class*

Reading the book *Há classes sociais* [There are social classes] (book 2) led children to become aware of the existence of different social classes and their characteristics. The children’s explanation of the class hierarchy and the distinction between people according to what they have economically illustrates this:

Gonçalo: “I think social classes are classes of people, the middle classes are like me, sometimes you can be very poor and sometimes you can be very rich.”

Paulo: “There are poor, average and rich. The middle classes... it’s like at this school: we don’t have the money to buy everything, but we have the money to buy something.”

The discussion about the different social classes and the existence of homeless people highlights the social inequality present in society, where some people have more resources and opportunities than others.

Diana: “I train in futsal for free.... and there’s a pavilion there, but it’s been closed for a few weeks so the poor people who are homeless can stay there.”

Also, after reading this book, Diana’s references to her friend with a rich grandfather and the closed pavilion for homeless people show how consumer power and access to goods and services can influence people’s quality of life.

Gonçalo approaches and says: “We don’t want to have so much, but we don’t want to have nothing either”. Diana says: “When I was at the other school, I had a friend (...) and his grandfather was rich.”

In turn, reading the books *Há classes sociais* [There are social classes] (book 2), *Estrelinha* [Little Star] (book 9) and *A pequena semente* [The tiny seed] (book 20) allowed the children to discuss altruistic actions, such as the youtuber who paid for people’s surgeries, and to talk about the role of rich people in sharing with the poor, highlighting the difference between charity (one-off actions of help) and social justice (tackling the structural causes of inequality).

Gonçalo: “I think the rich have to share with the poor.”

Diana: “There’s a youtuber who’s very rich and shares with the poor.”

Gonçalo’s comment about calling homeless people to live in his house after reading the book *Há classes sociais* [There are social classes] (book 2) was repeated on another occasion by Afonso after the book *Estrelinha* [Little Star] (book 9), which also suggests a charitable approach, but above all a willingness to help the Other.



The discussion about the book *Estrelinha* (book 9) also highlights the children's desire to help that social group, demonstrating their awareness and empathy towards people in vulnerable situations. The children come up with ideas to help, such as calling homeless people to live in their homes and providing food.

Their testimonies reflect the children's awareness of social issues such as inequality, social classes and consumer power. It also shows how empathy and understanding of situations of vulnerability can lead children to think about actions with an emphasis on individual action.

Afonso returns and talks to the researcher about the story *Estrelinha*. He says that the story is "nice, and that girl just wants to help people". The researcher asks who these people are, and Afonso replies that they are homeless people.

The researcher questions, "Have you ever seen people like that on the street?" and Afonso replies, "No, but if I had, I would have helped them!"

"How?" asks the investigator.

Afonso says "I can take them to my house or... to... I don't know, I guess that's it" (NC, 28/02/2023).

### Gender

Gender is transversal in all the conceptions the children made after reading the books on this topic and is present in various ways in their interactions. When the children talk about having two fathers or two mothers after reading *O livro do Pedro* (book 4) and *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* (book 14), they show the diversity of family structures, regardless of the gender of the fathers or mothers.

The book begins: "These are my two fathers, Pedro and Paulo. I went to live with them when I was very little, I don't remember but they told me. I was seven years old when Pedro was out of work for a year and during that year he drew a lot of pictures."

Teresa asks frightened: What do you mean, two fathers?

The researcher replies: There are children who have two fathers or two mothers.

Teresa says in response that she's never seen that, Mariana just laughs a little shyly.

The researcher asks: "What did you think of her having two grandfathers in this story? Two men who are married?". Gonalo: "Two married men...". The researcher: "Do you like or dislike that part?". Gonalo respond "No problem!" (NC, 30/01/2023).

It was also possible to discuss professions, work and, in this case, the children talked about professions associated with the male gender, with men working as priests, in construction or even as magicians, in other words, expressing a socially dominant heteronormative and patriarchal order. The implicit reflection in book 10 - *Todos fazemos tudo* - about men and women being able to do any job highlights the importance of deconstructing gender stereotypes and combating that order in this context.

Leafing through the book, Lucas says: "Men build [work in construction] but women can build too".

"I want to be a policeman!" says Mariana

Diana approaches and says: "I want to be an artist, a painter, and so does Gonalo!"

She continued: "It says here that people think boys should wear blue and girls should wear pink, but I don't like pink!" (NC, 30/01/2023)

Teresa looks at a picture of a woman fishing and says “only my father knows how to fish, not my mother. I wish I knew how to fish”. Then she sees a woman doing magic and says: “I thought women couldn't be magicians, I only know men who do magic!” (NC, 09/03/2023)

“Was it a woman who did the ceremony? But if she's a woman, how can they perform the ceremony?”

In response, Diana says “it's like them!!! it's a rabbit and another rabbit”.

Gonçalo was referring to the fact that the rabbit was a priest.

Valentina says: “So what's his name, who says he's getting married or not?”

Some children shout: he's a priest.

Gonçalo says: “Then it's a priestess! [playing with words]” (NC, 30/03/2023)

The children show that they understand that there are boys and girls, identifying gender in a binary way. However, the reading about boys wearing dresses triggered after reading *Os vestidos do Tiago* (book 6) led to a reflection on the diversity of gender identities.

The children mentioned the traditional association of colours with gender, such as girls wearing pink and boys wearing blue. This reflects a cultural stereotype that has been reinforced over time. We could also identify social pressure and gender norms through the reactions of the other children laughing at Gonçalo, after reading the books *Os vestidos do Tiago* (book 6) and *Um dia na vida de Marlon Bundo* [*A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo*] (book 14), expressing his taste for pink and showing how gender norms can influence the way people are perceived and how they can feel pressured to follow certain patterns of behaviour and preferences.

At the same time, it shows the defiance of gender stereotypes by other children. Diana pointed out that she doesn't like pink, challenging the stereotype that all girls should like that colour, showing that children are willing to question stereotypes.

Gender stereotypes are also in evidence with Cristiano's remark about Xavier the rabbit from *Marlon Bundo* [*A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo*] (book 14) “looking like a girl” highlights how children perceive and associate gender characteristics with appearance. Diana's response, mentioning that it's like a “rabbit and another rabbit getting married”, reflects the diversity of interpretations between children.

### *Participation*

After reading *O protesto* [The protest] (book 11), the children talk about protest as a way of speaking out against things they don't agree with, highlighting their awareness of freedom of expression and civic participation. The children also start a discussion on the page about counting votes and the election in the context of the story in the book *Um dia na vida de Marlon Bundo* [*A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo*] (book 14), showing their understanding of the importance of participating in decisions that affect a group. Also, after reading *É assim a ditadura* [This is what a dictatorship is like] (book 12), Gonçalo mentions that people have the right to speak, dance, draw, write, walk and other activities, showing a perception centred on individual rights and a particular form of democracy, the representative one.

Gonçalo: "Voting is like choosing the person who has a role... and we have to choose who we think is most important".

Reading the book *É assim a ditadura* (book 12), Denis and Madalena point out activities such as playing, studying and walking as rights that people have, demonstrating the importance of participation in different aspects of their daily lives, without ever forgetting their role as students.

Gonçalo: People have the right to talk, dance, draw, write, walk

Martim: to study!

Madalena: to play!

When discussing the garbage lying by the sea on a page of the book *O protesto* [The protest], the children showed concern for environmental issues that can also affect their communities and neighbourhoods.

Teresa: "So if I were president, I'd take out all the garbage in the world and all the garbage in this area!"

All these conceptions show the children's ability to understand concepts related to participation in different spheres of life. They show awareness of protests, elections, individual rights, social activities, community and environmental issues.

The dialogue between the children highlights the process of discovery and reflection on differences and diversity. Initially, some children mentioned that they thought their hair and faces were the same, but after reading the books *Cá em Casa Somos* [At home we are], *Não mal ser diferente* [It's Okay to Be Different], *O Jaime é uma Sereia* [Julian is a mermaid], *A surpresa de Handa* [Handa's surprise], *Menina bonita do laço de fita* [The Pretty Girl with the Ribbon], *Orelhas de borboleta* [Butterfly ears] they realized that there are differences in physical aspects. The discussion about the origins of people's colours is also an example of how the children are reflecting on racial diversity.

At the end of the intervention, when the focus groups were held, most of the children showed a genuine interest in reading, sharing their preferences for different types of books. The format of the book was also appreciated by the children, who valued the illustrations. Even the children who said they liked books with "more words and fewer drawings" (Sofia, GF3) acknowledged the importance of images in enriching the reading experience.

The children also showed the ability to make connections with real life, by identifying with characters and situations in the stories they read, making connections between the fictional characters and their own lives, or situations of prejudice that have gained prominence in the media. This indicates a developed level of empathy and understanding of the narratives.

In all the groups, the children mentioned the difference between the books that existed before at school and the books provided by the project. They talked about the variety of new books available, that there

are books that are “more realistic” (Manuel, GF3 and Rafael GF3 in pictures and with stories that are “funnier” (Diana, GF1 and Sofia and Gonçalo GF3) and “beautiful” (Cristiano, GF1).

## Final considerations

This intervention project proved to be doubly useful and important for the group of children. On one hand, they were exposed to books that were distinct both in content and format, demonstrating that reading and illustrated books can also be enriching, challenging, and enjoyable, offering access to a previously unknown world. On the other hand, it facilitated engagement with and discussion about themes relevant to the children's daily lives, such as diversity, social class, gender, and participation, which rarely have the space for open reflection where children can share their worldviews, stimulated through reading.

It can be affirmed that the books the children accessed gave voice to everyday issues that are often silenced or marginalised in schools and society. Although this practice was possible during the intervention and it is known that time was limited to alter perspectives and the classroom teacher did not continue with this strategy, there remains hope that something lasting might emerge for some children in the future. Despite this, it does not diminish the relevance and richness of the experiences the children had during the intervention project, as it was a fruitful period for addressing and discussing issues that shape the children's context and are often "ignored" daily.

Reading some books broadened the children's understanding of diversity, while others introduced discussions on gender, social class, and participation, enabling them to relate these themes to their own daily experiences.

In summary, "through illustrated books, children are represented and challenged to consider different human experiences, confronting imagined and real worlds" (Wild, 2022, p. 733)<sup>7</sup>.

Received on 13 September 2023

Approved on 12 August 2024

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Despite having a good understanding of the group and a planned reading schedule, there were frequent deviations from the routine. Even when using the strategy of allowing children to choose, by presenting two or three book options for them to select from, this approach sometimes failed for various reasons. These included the children's lack of interest in the proposed books, themes, or illustrations, or a mismatch with their expectations for the activities planned for that week. For example, in the week leading up to the Easter holidays, the children anticipated a story related to the holiday, as this is the dominant pedagogical practice at the school. However, the books proposed for that week dealt with themes of political participation.

<sup>2</sup> Children who officially have Portuguese as a non-native language attend Portuguese class in a different group with another foreign language teacher. However, due to a

shortage of teaching and non-teaching staff at the school during the academic year of the study, these children could not be assessed.

- <sup>3</sup> The presentation of the books follows the chronological order in which they were introduced to the children.
- <sup>4</sup> The books were introduced based on the children's interests, with two or three different books being presented at each session.
- <sup>5</sup> In the classroom, there were always two adults (the researcher and the teacher) present when reading aloud moments.
- <sup>6</sup> The focus groups lasted between 16 and 25 minutes.
- <sup>7</sup> This paper is supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement 101004491. Project SMOOTH - Educational Commons and Active Social Inclusion. <https://smooth-ecs.eu/>

## References

- BUS, Adriana; ANSTADT, Rosalie. Toward Digital Picture Books for a New Generation of Emergent Readers. **AERA Open**, v. 7, n. 1, p. 1-15, 2021. Disponível em: <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211063874>. Acesso em: 01 jul. 2023.
- CIECIERSKI, Lisa; BINTZ, William. Developing a challenging and integrated curriculum. **Middle School Journal**, v. 46, n. 5, p. 17-25, 2015.
- CIECIERSKI, Lisa; NAGELDINGER, James; BINTZ, William; MOORE, Sara. New Perspectives on Picture Books. **Athens Journal of Education**, v. 4, n. 2, p. 123-136, 2017. Disponível em: <https://doi.org/10.30958/aje.4-2-2>. Acesso em: 01 jul. 2023.
- COSTA, Rosalina Pisco. Choreographies of Emotion: Sociological Stories behind Bedtime, Fairy Tales and Children's Books. **Global Studies of Childhood**, v. 2, n. 2, p. 117-128, 2012. Disponível em: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/gsch.2012.2.2.117>.
- FERREIRA, Manuela; TOMÁS, Catarina. Fazendo Género Heteronormativo no Jardim de Infância. **Revista Interações**, v. 18, n. 61, p. 211-232, 2022. Disponível em: <https://doi.org/10.25755/int.27013>. Acesso em: 01 jul. 2023.
- FREITAG, Raquel Meister Ko; SÁ, José Júnior de Santa. Leitura em voz alta, variação linguística e o sucesso na aprendizagem inicial da leitura. **Ilha do Desterro**, n. 72, p. 41-62, 2020.
- HOPPE, Kayln. Teacher read-alouds: more than just story time. **Kansas English**, v. 103, n. 1, p. 7-14, 2022.
- HUSBAND, Terry. Using multicultural picture books to promote racial justice in urban early childhood literacy classrooms. **Urban Education**, v. 54, n. 8, p. 1058-1084, 2019.
- MORGAN, Hani. Picture Book Biographies for Young Children: A Way to Teach Multiple Perspectives. **Early Childhood Educ**, v. 37, p. 219-227, 2009. DOI: 10.1007/s10643-009-0339-7.
- NORRIS, Katherine. Using the read aloud and picture books for social justice. **Kappa Delta Pi Record**, v. 56, p. 183-187, 2020. DOI: 10.1080/00228958.2020.1813521.
- OKTARINA, Putu; HARI, Ni Putu; AMBARWATI, Ni Made. The Effectiveness of Using Picture Book to Motivate Students Especially Young Learners in Reading.

**Yavana Bhāshā: Journal of English Language Education**, v. 3, n. 1, p. 72-79, 2020.

O'NEIL, Kathleen Ellen. Once upon today: Teaching for social justice with post-modern picture books. **Children's Literature in Education**, v. 41, n. 1, p. 40-51, 2010. Disponível em: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-009-9097-9>. Acesso em: 01 jul. 2023.

STROUSE, Gabrielle; NYHOUT, Angela; GANEA, Patricia. The Role of Book Features in Young Children's Transfer of Information from Picture Books to Real-World Contexts. **Front. Psychol.**, v. 9, p. 50, 2018. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00050.

WILD, Norline. Picturebooks for Social Justice: Creating a Classroom Community Grounded in Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Action. **Early Childhood Educ J**, v. 51, p. 733-741, 2023. Disponível em: <https://doi-org.ezproxy.usherbrooke.ca/10.1007/s10643-022-01342-1>. Acesso em: 01 jul. 2023.

**Carolina Gonçalves** is Ph.D. and MSc in Education Sciences, and an Associate Professor at the Université de Sherbrooke. She is a researcher at GRISE (Sherbrooke) and CICS.NOVA (NOVA University, Lisbon), with numerous publications in the field of Education and Teacher Training.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3176-2601>

E-mail: [carolina.goncalves@usherbrooke.ca](mailto:carolina.goncalves@usherbrooke.ca)

**Catarina Tomás** is Ph.D in Child Studies, a sociologist, and an Associate Professor at Escola Superior de Educação de Lisboa. Integrated researcher at CICS.NOVA (NOVA University, Lisbon), with numerous publications in the fields of Sociology of Childhood, Children's Rights, and Sociological Perspectives on Early Childhood Education.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9220-964X>

E-mail: [ctomas@fcsh.unl.pt](mailto:ctomas@fcsh.unl.pt)

**Aline Almeida** is MSc in Sociology from the Federal University of Paraná, Brazil, and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. at NOVA University Lisbon. She conducts research at CICS.NOVA and holds a scholarship within the SMOOTH - Educational Common Spaces initiative, focusing on Rights, Equality, and Difference.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2726-3700>

E-mail: [aline.uelcs@gmail.com](mailto:aline.uelcs@gmail.com)

Availability of research data: the dataset supporting the results of this study is published in this article.

Editor in charge: Carla Karnoppi Vasques

