

BETWEEN BEARS AND DRAGONS: A READING RECEPTION EXPERIENCE WITH A CHILD WITH AUTISM

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Introduction

Creating this paper was like beginning a journey. Perhaps because my son Bruno's few words are an invitation to journey down paths of a different logic, where perception plays in order to appropriate knowledge. He looks at what we wouldn't even glance at and is astonished by the most everyday things; he says "rain" when he sees tears fall.

Bruno is three years old and suffers from moderate classic autism: a general disorder of development that affects three areas: his social interaction skills, his communication and linguistic skills, and his ability to play and develop activities and interests, which wind up being very restrictive.

A journey is also what we begin with every book. In this case, for four days we boarded *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, in its Spanish edition from Ediciones Ekaré. The goal was very clear: I would make a case study with my autistic son from a qualitative focus to analyze the link between the reading of this picture book and the processes of construction of meaning that could manifest in a child with those specified characteristics. Now then, how to observe this process? I chose four analysis criteria to guide the observation: appropriation of the book object, appropriation of the told story, connection with his life experience and communication attempts during the reading.

The choice of this book was not random. It is, without doubt, a very special picture book to read: the text has a great musicality and narrative rhythm, something that is a very important attribute for early ages; the illustration is able to handle the complexity of the story and, finally it is a very well sequenced and structured narrative.

This text collects the experience that we lived, reading after reading, during four intense days, during which emotion won over reason and reason enjoyed a new way of understanding the world.

Methodology

The reading sessions were included within Bruno's nighttime ritual, before bedtime. The reason for this was simple: they needed to take place in as natural an environment as possible, because one thing autism has little tolerance of it's unexpected changes, which wind up creating anguish and confusion in those who suffer from it. Thus it was necessary to anticipate the actions of the day through the images.

All the sessions were recorded in a notebook and two of them were recorded on video, which offered a greater analysis of Bruno's behavior during the reading.

Justification

The studies or research that ties autism with reading from an aesthetic point of view are practically nonexistent. Nonetheless, there are various reasons to join those two worlds. Children with autism have a high level of visual sensitivity, hence the frequent use of rebuses or photos in their treatment. In this sense, picture books are an ideal genre, because each page has a technical and semantic intentionality, which is offered as a bridge between the world of the artist and that of the reader. On the other hand, one of the problems of autism is that those who suffer from it have slight communication intentions, as well as difficulties in understanding gestural language. For this reason, it's necessary to show them that voices and tones and gestures and glances all transmit messages, something that reading aloud makes easier. Finally, in her book *Children Reading Pictures*, Evelyn Arizpe highlights the accurate and graphic interpretation of an autistic child in Kitamura's book *Lily Takes a Walk*.

The Results: *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* or the Adventure of Discovering the World

In "*El proceso de la lectura*" ("*The Process of Reading*"), Iser affirms that "The reader only feels satisfaction when the text offers the possibility of exercising our abilities"¹. In this sense, the choice of picture book was a good one, for the synergy between text and illustration offered Bruno two great opportunities: to understand the story that was being told and connect it with his own life experience, which gave him intense pleasure that is transferred to his mood during the reading.

From Understanding to Appropriation

"The spoken only truly acts when it refers to what is not said." This statement by Iser aptly synthesizes the thread that unites the noise of the words with the silent tumult of emotions and experiences that the reading sessions awoke.

Bruno perfectly understood the story and the elements in it. His gaze attentively searched the illustrations for things he could name. In the beginning, he pointed to the flowers. And he said: "Look, Bruno: flowers." One could see satisfaction on his face. Thus, in every session, he pointed to and named the flowers and then looked at me

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☞ Iser, W (1979): "El proceso de la lectura" (The Process of Reading) in

smiling. Soon he began to point at other things that caught his interest: ducks, water, mud, forest. The global image helped him to join signified and signifier of each one of the elements. But also, to extrapolate the experience of the reading to the exterior world. One afternoon, we returned home from the Early Attention Center through the park. Suddenly, Bruno jumped into a little hole of dry earth. He looked at me and, with a very big smile, said: "Mud! Thick oozy mud." It wasn't the only time that a part of the story visited the streets; he did it a second time and it became a strategy to break an obsession. We were late going to school. He walked slowly and there was no way to hurry him along, until I saw him running toward the stoplight. I thought, from that moment, that everything would be a nightmare, because that simple traffic element enjoys a high degree of fascination for children with autism. Bruno stared at it entranced. Then this dialogue took place:

C:-A stoplight! A tall and green stoplight! Over it we can't

B:-Go.

C: Under it we can't ...

B: Go.

C: Oh no!

B: "We've got to go thwew it" .

And he began to walk. During the walk we played at "going through" lots of things, and all of them were passed successfully. This indicated that he understood the principal verb of the story and every sequence where it was used.

I remember that during the first reading sessions, in the scene where the family crosses the mud, I asked him: "Where is the mud?" And he pointed to the baby's feet. Curiously, when I asked him who would go into the cave, he pointed to this same character. I asked myself if, on being the smallest character, he identified with the baby. Some experiences indicated that this was the case. Some time ago we had read the book *¡A bañarse! (Bathtime!)*, in which a child gets undressed and is naked. During this period, Bruno had taken to undressing just because. That's why, when he saw this story, he couldn't stop laughing and said "don't take off jacket" and he replaced the word "underwear" that appeared in the book with "diaper" when he repeated the scene. This was reinforced with what happened in the last session: Bruno spontaneously pointed to

the man on the cover of *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* and said "daddy". Second act: I pointed to the girl and asked him: "Who is this?". He answered "Inés" (the name of his sister). Then he pointed alternatively at the boy and at the baby and said "Bruno" in a voice lacking conviction. Baby? Older boy? Why did he doubt? My guess is that the answer coincides with a special period for him: that of sphincter control, which necessarily implies a growth that he was not yet ready to assume². Roseblatt reminds us "*The ability to feel compassion or of identifying with the experiences of others is one of the most precious human attributes. Scientific studies have reveal how generalized our tendency to identify ourselves with something outside of ourselves. This has proven true even of non-human subjects. We tend to feel ourselves "on the inside", to achieve empathy, with the image of the tree that blows in the wind, until the successful artist, in some way, makes of us the tree itself.*"³

And Always, Emotion

Bruno so liked the book that he began to listen to it in movement. While he didn't stop alternating his gaze between the book and myself, he didn't stop running through the room, acting out the story every time it was possible. His tone of voice rose considerably with the refrain "because over it we can't go" and transmitted nervousness and happiness. What's unquestionable is that Bruno perfectly anticipated every scene... until he surprised me near the end. This was the page where the family enters the cave, when the following dialogue took place:

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☞ While we removed his diapers three weeks ago, he refuses to "wet the water." He clearly says "not like toilet" and "no want piss toilet".

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☞ Roseblatt, L. (2002): *La literatura como exploración, (Literature as Exploration)* FCE, México, pg. 64.

C: "One shiny wet nose, two big furry ears, two big goggly eyes. It's a..."

B: "Da Dog!"

At first, I thought that it was a problem of understanding, because it's true that the description could also apply to the dog. So, in successive readings, I pointed out each part of the bear as I recited the text. But it was no use, because Bruno insisted on the dog and his voice was weaker and more concerned each time. Finally I asked him: "What's wrong with the dog?" And his little finger drew a perfect line from the dog's gaze to the bear. Then I understood that emotion had guided him on that journey, that he had walked beside it, with it, and had entered the cave. From his point of view, the encounter, the narrative climax, was the most important. And this was reflected in the danger to the dog on approaching the bear. This fact helped me to give a framework to the tension that sometimes gripped him, on "having to cross through", he sadly said "no cross no" while he didn't stop moving. I return to Roseblatt, "literature offers a *living through*, not just a *knowing about*." To which I would add: especially when, with children with certain difficulties, one pays attention to the power of the images.

Conclusion

Three ideas result from the experience analyzed: the first is that, even at three years old, it is possible to hunt a bear; the second is that Bruno has reached aesthetic pleasure, thanks to the emotion collection that the picture book has managed to awaken in him. This has resulted in a greater understanding of the world and in a significant increase of communicative intention. The third is a belief in the power of picture books to work with children with autism, although there is still a long road to travel in this regard.

In *Acto de leer (The Act of Reading)*, Iser affirms: "*it is necessary to describe reading as a process of changing effect, of a dynamic nature, between the text and reader, for the signs of the text or, in the given case, its structures acquire their finality as*

*soon as they are able to produce acts in whose development there is a translatability of the text in the reader's conscience.*⁴ For Bruno, this "translatability" meant putting into action different cognitive processes, such as discovery and understanding, but above all, managing to connect with his emotions and communicate them. Perhaps that's why, as I finish writing these conclusions, I can't help thinking of the relevance of G. K. Chesterton's words, paraphrased from his essay "The Red Angel": "Fairy tales do not tell children that dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be killed."