

PECULIAR NUTRITIONAL HABITS IN ROALD DAHL WORKS: A STORYTELLING INTERVENTION ON PROMOTING PRESCHOOLERS' DIETARY SELF-REGULATION

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Abstract

One of the recurring motifs in Roald Dahl works whether leading to the plot's unfolding or not, is the peculiar nutritional habits and, by extension, everything connected with it, such as socio-emotional behaviors and concepts of the dietary rules' infringement. Looking at *The Twits'* distorted dietary hygiene, *George's Marvellous Medicine's* disorientated nutritional advices and *The BFG's* disgusting essential goods, it can be observed that the food as an act and its processes, are cultural notions identifying current concepts of not only the excesses and the adult's control upon children, but also the pedagogically proper nutrition. A reading of the interpretations carried by food's humorous representations in Dahl's aforementioned classics is ventured. The ways of how children's literature depicts the characters' nutritional attitudes and their possible implications on their behavior are analyzed. While proceeding, the design of a storytelling intervention on promoting dietary self-regulation is proposed for kindergarten. A series of narrative and creative writing activities of subverting and parodying Dahl's works, which aim to familiarize preschoolers with notions such as nutritional balance, food hygiene and eating habits, is presented. Dahl's humorous and extreme carnivalesque depiction of nourishment, followed by an exaggerated deviation of normal eating habits, is what could provoke and motivate preschoolers to shape a healthy nutritional attitude and a dietary self-regulation. The contribution of this particular study is to highlight children's literature significant role as a means of influencing children's thinking on fundamental issues related with their health, and to demonstrate storytelling's dynamics as a teaching tool for shaping their attitudes towards life matters.

Keywords: *Peculiar nutritional habits, Roald Dahl, storytelling intervention, preschoolers, dietary self-regulation.*

1. Introduction

“Food experiences form part of the daily texture of every child's life [...]; thus, it is hardly surprising that food is a constantly recurring motif in literature written for children” (Keeling & Pollard 2009: 10). As such a case, Roald Dahl uses food linking it with peculiar nutritional habits, social misbehaviors and concepts of the dietary rules' infringement. Looking at “The Twits” (1980), “George's Marvellous Medicine” (1981) and “The BFG” (1982), it can be observed that the archetypal of food as an act and its processes, the infringement of what is associated with nourishment, constitute a reason for the emergence of symbolisms that describe a powerful instrument for rewarding or discipline, as bait for deception, control or even bullying (Keeling & Pollard, 2009).

2. Literature review: Critical reading of nutritional habits in Roald Dahl works

Bakhtin's carnival theory (1984) offers a theoretical tool for the study of children's literature where the predominant ideology is being violated and social rules are being questioned. He acknowledges carnivalesque elements which characterize any literary text that tends towards the mockery and questioning of nourishment values, and the twisting of this basic human need. The paradox eating occurrences in Dahl's works consist of a form of expression of this anarchistic disposition against conventions (Kalaitzi & Gavriilidis, 2019). The gastronomically extreme peculiarities in three selected texts will be interpreted subsequently. All texts, dated to the early 80ies, frame exaggerations in eating habits or deviations from whatever constitutes normality in nourishment procedures. In the critical approaching of the texts below, there has been an attempt of reading them as examples of the carnivalesque element; as characteristic token of texts for this age of readership that feature complex compounds of humor which, as Alberghene (2013) puts it, offer the opportunity for child readers to become aware of alternative ways of thinking.

2.1. In dinner with The Twits

Mr Twit didn't even bother to open his mouth wide when he ate. As a result (and because he never washed) [...] you would see tiny little specks of dried-up scrambled eggs stuck to the hairs, and spinach and tomato ketchup and fish fingers and minced chicken livers and all the other disgusting things Mr Twit liked to eat. If you looked closer still (hold your noses [...]), [...] you would probably see [...] a piece of maggotty green cheese or a mouldy old cornflake or even the slimy tail of a tinned sardine. [...] By sticking out his tongue and curling it sideways to explore the hairy jungle around his mouth, he was always able to find a tasty morsel here and there to nibble on. (Dahl, 1980:20-22)

The description of Mr Twit absolutely expresses what Daniel (2006) suggests that food reveals who we are, where we came from, and what we want to be. For the young reader, the adult Mr Twit -from which Mrs Twit does not essentially differ much- is in a state of glorious disharmony with the rules of dietary hygiene imposed by the society. Katz (1980) notes that manners constitute an important feature of eating and the types of food consumed may signal some broader meaning in the text, or important insights about individual characters. Quoting West, it can be argued that “an aspect of The Twits that appeals more strongly to children than to adults is the disgusting nature of Mr and Mrs Twit. [...] On one occasion, Mrs Twit puts her glass eye in Mr Twit's beer mug, and he nearly swallows it. Another time she pours spaghetti sauce over a plateful of live worms and serves it to her unsuspecting husband” (1990: 115). The absolutely appalling gastronomic behavior of Mr Twit, distorts every familiar view of hygienic culinary behavior and concludes with the pleasure that is supplied by the grotesque, which complies with Bakhtin's quote “all that was terrifying becomes grotesque” (1984: 91). By witnessing the grotesque couple in their unbalanced eating habits, young readers could distinguish all that our matter is subjected to, in which our ethics and our substance is being codified, if we deviate from the rules. Dahl constructs a disgusting depiction of adult figures in reference with their dietary -with an absolute lack of nutritional balance- attitudes -which refer to grotesque medieval comic images- while he subjects them to immense criticism.

2.2. In dinner with George's Marvellous Medicine

It's what's good for you that count. [Grandma snapped]. From now on, you must eat cabbage three times a day. [...] And if it's got caterpillars in it, so much better!'. [...] Cabbage doesn't taste of anything without a few boiled caterpillars in it. Slugs, too. [...] Whenever I see a live slug on a piece of lettuce [...] I gobble it up quick before it crawls away. Delicious.' [...] 'Warms and slugs and beetle bugs. You don't know what's good for you [...] Beetles are perhaps best of all. They go crunch! [...] Sometimes, if you are lucky, she said, you get a beetle inside the stem of a stick of celery. [...] A big fat earwig is very taste, Grandma said, licking her lips. (Dahl, 1981:5-7)

An implication of children's unawareness of what's nutritious for them to eat is underlined here; but George, who perceives the alienated gastronomic preferences in the dietary advices of his Grandma, attempts not only to contradict her authority, but also to restore her gastronomic balance through the production of a medicine. The peculiar dietary ideas of Grandma and the daring attempts of George, meet in the *gobble up* act, since medicine and meals are related to consumption. Beyond this, George's marvellous medicine ends up disfiguring strangely whoever happens to taste it. It is a common pattern after all in books of children's literature to find metamorphosis and bodily size fluctuation that comes from eating and drinking, with the most renowned example to be Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland (Katz, 1980). The resetting of size is not achieved in Grandma because by exaggerating with the dosage of the marvellous medicine begun to shrink until she was no bigger than a pin and then a pumpkin seed, until she is rendered invisible. As it is a common practice in Roald Dahl's works, the figure of the cannibalistic adult, Grandma in that case, suffers from a horrible ending, reversing the order of the world and carrying implications of why children should respect their food (Kalaitzi & Gavriilidis, 2019). The narrative reveals one more adult who is punished because of their unorthodox dietary habits, and who, in George's case, tries to disorientate a child too, as far as proper nutrition is concerned (Katz, 1980). Despite the various symbolisms and interpretative approaches that can be used to understand the changes that matter can produce on our essence, in Dahl, food is the vehicle for him to play with the social rules of the adult class and, in that case, to imply lessons for food hygiene by penalizing adults who like their vegetables filled with bugs.

2.3. In dinner with the BFG

In BFG's surrealistic secular society there are only two kinds of food, as well as eaters. The snozzcumber -a long striped lengthwise black and white cucumber with wart-like growths [...] tasted of frogskin, rotten fish, cockroaches and slime wangers (Dahl, 1982:58-61) - along with frobscottle, is the sole diet of the Big Friendly Giant; a kind of a vegetarian one might say. But for the rest of the non-friendly giants, Fleshlumpeater, Bonecruncher, Manhugger, Childchewer, Meatdripper, Gizzardgulper, Maidmasher, Bloodbottler and Butcher Boy, human flesh is their treat; proven hard-core

carnivores as they are. Notions of food functioning as punishment appear at BFG. Not only the protagonist feeds himself with repulsive food in his effort not to be a flesh-eater, but when he captures the rest of man-eaters giants he feeds them this same food for the rest of their lives -an apparent act of penalization, due to the snozzcumber's disgusting flavor- which is even worse for them after a lifetime of eating humans (Hodgkins, 2002). It is, also, apparent that these terrifying giants' names reflect their human-being-diet and their gastronomic habits that favor the body. In accordance with Nikolajeva who states, "one of the most common folktales archetypal connected with the food, is 'to eat or to be eaten'" (2016: 365), Dahl, with a whole list of made-up language, called 'Gobblefunk', emphasizes on whatever is related to the consumption of food and drink, transforming the pleasure of food into a terrifying adventure. This transformation has strong carnivalesque elements and it is for this reason that the terrifying becomes entertainingly humorous (Bakhtin, 1984). With the carnivalesque depictions of the adult world, Giants' world in this case, the narrative challenges adult superiority in relation with their dietary habits and attitudes, while it gives to the child-readers the carnivalesque freedom in searching for different and alternative ways of action.

2.4. Aim of the current study

The particular study aims to present a series of interdisciplinary connections among literature, language and science. More specifically, food implications in Roald Dahl's works become the medium for teaching preschoolers about nutritional self-regulation through storytelling approaches. For the above purposes, a detailed outline of an intervention is proposed, as an interdisciplinary teaching approach in early years.

3. Methodology

3.1. Framework: A storytelling intervention on promoting preschoolers' dietary self-regulation

The design of a storytelling intervention on promoting dietary self-regulation is outlined below in a layout form (Tables 1, 2 and 3) as a teaching proposal for an average class (17-25) of preschoolers (5-6 years old). The intervention is divided into three phases, including nine activities in total (three activities per phase). Each phase uses one of selected Dahl's works as a reference point for subversion or parody, aiming to familiarize preschoolers with notions such as nutritional balance, food hygiene and eating habits. General purposes, specific objectives, and interdisciplinary connections of learning areas are based on the framework of the New Early Years Curriculum (Institute of Educational Policy, 2014).

Table 1. Intervention phase 1 – Nutritional balance limericks.

ACTIVITY LAYOUT: "Mouth-battles"			
GENERAL PURPOSE & SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate a knowledge of nutrients' value using storytelling ➢ To express themselves through limericks about nutritional balance (Institute of Educational Policy, 2014) 	LEARNING AREAS – INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Science/ Living creatures • Personal & Social Development/ Self-regulation • Language/ Oral speech • Art & Culture/ Painting (Institute of Educational Policy, 2014)
DESCRIPTION			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Activity 1 – All that Mr Twit can eat</u>: Each preschooler chooses a nutrient leftover from Mr Twit's mouth to present it in the circle. They gather information about its benefits and nutritional value. • <u>Activity 2 – Leftovers' vignettes</u>: Preschoolers draw vignettes of food leftovers. In the vignette they depict the ingredient of their choice and its benefits. • <u>Activity 3 – Cullinary battles</u>: All preschoolers generate limericks which present one of the ingredients from Mr Twit's mouth, its benefits and nutritional value*. <i>*i.e. There once were scrambled eggs/ Their rich iron made my heart begs/ Vitamins are filled/ Once eat them, you're healed/ A shelly fighter with yellow legs.</i> 			
LEARNING OUTCOMES	Preschoolers are expected to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • generate the narrative type of limericks • being aware of different nutrients' value 	ACTIVITY VARIANT	Mouth hygiene: <i>"Do you ever kiss poor Mrs Twit on the cheek with this mouth sick, Mr Twit?"</i> Haikus (Japanese poem of seventeen syllables) about hygienic habits

Table 2. Intervention phase 2 – Food hygiene Aesop fables.

ACTIVITY LAYOUT: “How bugs started living in vegetables”			
GENERAL PURPOSE & SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledge of food hygiene acts using storytelling To express themselves through Aesop fables about food hygiene (Institute of Educational Policy, 2014) 	LEARNING AREAS – INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Science/ Living creatures Personal & Social Development/ Self-regulation Language/ Oral speech Art & Culture/ Painting (Institute of Educational Policy, 2014)
DESCRIPTION			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activity 1 – Aesopian titles: Each preschooler chooses a bug and a vegetable to form the figures of their fable. They came up with a title which represents the bug’s damage on the vegetable. Activity 2 – Bugs & veggies’ vignettes: Preschoolers draw vignettes in which they depict the damage of the vegetable caused by its bug. Activity 3 – Food care fables: All preschoolers generate the Aesop fable structure, where a title gives contextual introduction of a bug (talking animal) and a vegetable, the plot describes the bug’s damage on the vegetable and the ethical guide in the end underlines the water purifying. *i.e. Title: “The slug that filled a lettuce with mucus”/ Plot: a lettuce which gets dirty by a slug - the rain cleans all the mucus from the lettuce/ Ethical guide: Now that the lettuce is slippery, the slug slips over. 			
LEARNING OUTCOMES	Preschoolers are expected to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> generate the narrative type of Aesop fables being able to give advice about proper food hygiene 	ACTIVITY VARIANT	Multicultural eating habits: <i>Insects’ culinary myths and fables around the world</i>

Table 3. Intervention phase 3 – Eating habits picture short stories.

ACTIVITY LAYOUT: “Giant stories”			
GENERAL PURPOSE & SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrate a knowledge of harmful dietary consequences using storytelling To express themselves through picture short stories about healthy eating habits (Institute of Educational Policy, 2014) 	LEARNING AREAS – INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Science/ Living creatures Personal & Social Development/ Self-regulation Language/ Oral speech Art & Culture/ Painting (Institute of Educational Policy, 2014)
DESCRIPTION			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activity 1 – Giant heroes: Preschoolers present Giants’ eating habits (due to their multiplicative names) in the circle and they express their thinking of why these habits are harmful. Activity 2 – Giant portraits: Each preschooler draws a portrait where they depict a Giant’s external characteristics and their peculiar eating preferences. Activity 3 – Giant stories: All preschoolers generate short stories which follow the basic narrative structure, where a Giant is the hero, who has a peculiar eating habit as a problem and a change in his nutrition is proposed as a solution in the end. *i.e. Hero: Bonecruncher / Problem: he eats only bones, which are stiff and difficult to digest and he suffers from constipation all the time/ Solution: start eating vegetables and fruits. 			
LEARNING OUTCOMES	Preschoolers are expected to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> generate the narrative type of picture short stories distinguish between healthy & harmful dietary consequences 	ACTIVITY VARIANT	Vegetarianism: <i>BFG’s vegetarian picture short story</i>

4. Discussion

Dahl’s characters like the Twits, Grandma and Giants are being taught valuable lessons due to their own endless unhygienic, peculiar, unbalanced, carnivalesque eating manners and attitudes. What has emerged is that the adults’ control forced upon the child’s perception of nourishment, is overthrown, ridiculed, condemned and finally, reaching the extremes, is defeated (Kalaitzi & Gavriilidis, 2019;

Keeling & Pollard 2009). And this humorous representation of nutritional standards is that allow young readers to dream about their reality; to set their own dietary rules (Alberghene, 2013; Stephens, 2013). The subversion of healthy dietary habits in Dahl's texts does not end with the reintegration into a familiar acceptable regularity (Kalaitzi & Gavriilidis, 2019). This is where the semantic gap is; this is why Dahl's texts could become powerful mediums for teaching.

When the proposed storytelling intervention was conducted, the produced preschoolers' narratives showed that preschoolers are capable not only to assimilate the importance of dietary self-regulation, but also to include food hygienic advises and balanced dietary habits in their storytelling. Nevertheless, the objective of this particular study is not the display of the results, but the presentation of the intervention itself, as an effective teaching proposal.

As Stephens (2013) highlights, whether food tempts or excites, punishes or rewards, it will remain a fixture of children's literature. And they are books for children that work as, among others, a medium for shaping young-readers' critical thinking. Hence, Dahl's humorous and extreme carnivalesque depiction of nourishment, followed by an exaggerated deviation of normal eating habits, is what could provoke and motivate preschoolers to shape a healthy nutritional attitude and a dietary self-regulation.

5. Conclusion

The contribution of this particular study to the field of scholarly approaches of children's literature is to highlight its significant role as a means of influencing children's critical thinking on fundamental issues related with their health and to prove storytelling's dynamics as a teaching tool for provoking young children's creative expression on attitudes towards life matters.

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