15th International Conference of the Spanish Association of Language and Literature Education, 15th International Conference SEDLL, 19-21 November 2014, Valencia, Spain

The Other Side as a rule rather than an exception
Rocío Domene Benito a *

a Universidad de Valencia, Valencia, Spain

Abstract

Currently, intercultural and heterogeneous realities set the tone in 21st literary education. Therefore, the role of multicultural children’s literature plays an essential role in order to reflect this intercultural diversity in Spanish classrooms. In this regard, The Other Side (2001) portrays an African American experience where interaction, communication and negotiation become crucial aspects for their protagonists. In this way, this picture book can be used not only to teach English as a foreign language in primary school, but also to show values like respect, tolerance and partnership.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Keywords: intercultural diversity; multicultural children’s literature; The Other Side; interaction; communication; negotiation; respect; tolerance; partnership.

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the phenomenon of diversity has emerged strongly in recent decades in Spanish education. As Teresa Aguado (2010) and Josep Ballester (2014) claim, nowadays, diversity must be considered a rule rather than an exception. Today, Spanish classrooms are characterized by being heterogeneous with children from several countries; where different origins, races, languages, cultures or religions can be found. These features must be viewed not like inequalities but like contrasts. Indeed, these contrasts generate opportunities which favour the integral development of children as human beings. This premise can be carried out throughout the use of an intercultural approach which promotes values such as equality, tolerance or respect.

Apart from that, the acceptance of a so-called intercultural diversity emphasizes a mutual enrichment among all the members of the educative community. In this way, this intercultural atmosphere can be applied to every field of knowledge. For instance, the subject of English as a foreign language should take advantage of it and foster new ways of teaching. Traditionally, the main aim of English subject has been to teach only the language and the depiction of its main features. Nevertheless, currently, a new horizon can be observed linking language and multicultural children’s literature. These two branches represent a solid relationship through which children can learn about the diversity and the different cultures in the world.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34-659822029; fax: +0-000-000-0000.
E-mail address: rodobe@postal.uv.es
In addition to this, an intercultural 21st literary competence should be underlined. Based on previous scholars’ theories such as Bakhtin, Kucer and Vygotsky, Reyes-Torres (2014:43) defines this renovated competence including three divisions: a constitutional and cognitive dimension, a linguistic and literary knowledge dimension and a sociocultural and aesthetic dimension. Equally important and intimately closed to one another, they favour critical thinking and imagination among young learners.

The main goal of this paper is to show how teachers can teach English as a foreign language from an intercultural perspective and the reality of our heterogeneous world by using multicultural picture books such as The Other Side (2001). This work by Jacqueline Woodson has to be taken, as I have expressed before in the title, as a rule rather than an exception due to the real world that it portrays throughout its pages. At a glimpse, this text can be considered a typical story about the friendship between a black girl and a white one. Nevertheless, many nuances can be explored.

2. Analysis

In the first place, as I have previously said this is a multicultural writing where a kind of active multiculturalism (Parekh, 2006) can be observed. Interaction, communication and negotiation are three key concepts in the relationship between two main characters. Anne is the white girl and Clover the black one. Although their worlds are apparently different, they fight to overcome prejudice, adults’ thoughts and racism. They interact and communicate with each other, they smile, they express their own opinions and feelings and finally they negotiate a kind of contract where their friendship prevails. Similarly, in English as foreign language classrooms in Spanish Primary education, these three aspects have to be emphasized to get a healthy intercultural coexistence among children from all the races, religions and cultures.

In the second place, as a main observer of this powerful friendship, the fence becomes a crucial character. The presence of this physical and symbolic fence gives another dimension to the world in which they live. Literally speaking, a fence is something that separates two things. In The Other Side, a careful reading must be carried out due to its relevance for the story. This set of wooden sticks represents racism, prejudice, social injustice and the avoidance of a successful interculturalism. However, innocence, curiosity and critical thinking gain the advantage when Annie and Clover, without disobeying their mothers, sit down on the fence in order to observe and reflect on their world. This is one of teachers’ tasks, help children be aware of the diversity of the world, of the existence of multiple points of views. As Tory Hayden advocates in her book Beautiful Child (2002), diversity and the importance of developing basic human values regardless colour skin or socioeconomic backgrounds are essential in our current society:

> There are still some basic values, I said. Basic values that have nothing to do with what colour you are or what language you speak, I said, or how high your IQ is or how much money you have. Human values. (2002:190).

In the third place, along with the fence, two “obliged” antagonistic situations can be found. On the one hand, Clover’s closed world where only black girls are accepted to jump rope are. On the other hand, Annie’s white world, on the other side of the fence, is a forbidden zone for Clover. But why? What is the reason why people with different backgrounds cannot share common interests and hobbies? Annie likes jumping rope. However, she only observes, with the fence as witness. In this case, it is Clover who acts as an intercultural mediator and introduces Annie to her group of friends. Fortunately, despite the first hesitation, Clover’s friends accept Annie as an equal. At that point, the relationship between the Self and the Other gains prominence like an indissoluble couple. Clover understands herself as a girl who wants to have fun and takes profit of an intercultural enrichment represented by Annie as the Other who can teach her many things and share games and experiences. In fact, it is a question of discovery, identification and acceptance of the Self so as to be conscious of the Other as a complement, not a separate part.

The author’s intention, as a result, is very clear. Jacqueline Woodson makes a critical denounce against prejudice and racism. Based on some truthful facts (discrimination in the sixties), she recreates a fictional story in which two girls suffer the consequences of discrimination and segregation. Another key aspect to explore is the importance of the setting and the context in the story, in this case, African-American situation in North America.

Analysing all this previous information, we can claim that interculturalism must be an important part of children’s education. In this case, as I have said before, we are involved with intercultural experiences all around us and multicultural literature has many benefits that can help teachers show values like social justice, partnership or respect to every single child.

The Other Side can be used as a striking resource to introduce children in the acceptance of the Others and the existence of the diversity emphasizing values of respect and tolerance. In this way, apart from learning grammatical
aspects like past tense or their different pronunciations, children are capable of discovering the power of friendship and explore how to overcome difficulties. The role of the teacher here would be to help children explore and discuss some controversial issues such as racism, segregation or prejudice and cultural differences. Through teachers’ support, students achieve an active role in their education and they become the main protagonists of their own education. Teachers are in charge of presenting the situations, but they are able to think and reflect on them. It is a well-accepted fact that reading books can help children develop their imagination and their critical thinking. In this way, with teachers’ guidance, they are capable of interpreting Clover and Annie’s story with “intercultural” eyes. Besides, the most important, apply it to their familiar and daily experiences.

Along all the pages of Jacqueline Woodson’s masterpiece, teachers can find many didactic resources to carry out in the classroom. In this case, I would like to focus on the final message, the moral. What is Woodson’s purpose when approaching Annie and Clover’s story to young learners? She is trying to say something like: children, you are the future; you have the possibility of destroying the fence. Paying attention to the last page of this picture book, students can observe a relaxing but at the same time reflecting situation where all the girls are surrounding the fence. Body language plays a crucial part here. On the one hand, Annie and Clover are hopefully discussing about the destruction of the fence and other two girls are listening carefully and enthusiastically. On the other hand, it’s important to appreciate how one girl is looking in the contrary direction like a symbol of resignation. Thus, another message could be the idea of involving everyone in interculturalism, encouraging interaction, communication and negotiation. In this way, although the fence between blacks and whites has existed for many decades, today there are other fences, too. Fences like the illegal slave trade in Uganda and Sudan reflecting in children’s voices such as Daniel or Alice. Both of them were anonymous kids who suffered from abduction in 21st century (2013:83-91). In the case of Daniel, he was obliged to work as a soldier and when he managed to escape, he found a harsh reality: his family was dead. Similarly to Daniel, Alice lived a nightmare and she even had a child before reencountering with her parents. Not so far away, other fences can be observed here in our country when children from other countries, races or cultures are rejected as the Others. For instance, Moroccan or Romanian children have difficulties to integrate themselves in the classroom due to linguistic or ethnic issues. At that point, it is extremely important to highlight the relevance of education. According to the Article 26.2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948):

> Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

Therefore, children deserve to have an intercultural education based on social justice, partnership, respect and tolerance so as to avoid these fences. On this matter, Grace, a girl who experienced trafficking describes what the main values of education are for her: “It means so much to me when someone helps without seeing me as dirt, but as a person…you have helped me to feel part of this world as human and equal to everyone” (2013:175). She is just asking for essential human rights.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, when reading The Other Side, children learn a foreign language, important elements of another culture and civic and moral values. This reading can be considered like a dialogue, a conversation among different cultures where children’s thoughts are changed and modelled by means of critical thinking and imagination (2007:120). According to Cottrell (2011:4) developing critical thinking, students’ skills are favoured with observation, reasoning, decision-making, analysis, judgement and persuasion. On the other hand, as I have stressed before, in a world shaped by globalisation and intercultural exchanges, the story of Annie and Clover represents the rule rather than the exception. It is possible to find severalannies and Clovers in Spanish classrooms and every single child must be considered an important, unique and one-off human being. In consequence, every single tradition or belief must be taken into account to show children the world greatness and plurality.

References

Ballester, J. (2014). What does Reading, Literary and Intercultural Education Mena?. In Thinking through Children's Literature in the Classroom. (pp. 53-64), Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.