

Children's Literature as an Important Tool for Education of Sustainability and the Environment

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Received: July, 2011; Revised: November, 2011; Accepted: December, 2011

Abstract

Children's literature is operated and distributed on the basis of faith, whereby if there is a place for effective links between literature and society, then it will naturally be found first in children's literature. For the most part children's literature is goal directed and amongst its targets is the assimilation of socio-cultural values. The number of study hours for children's literature in the colleges for education is very limited, and only infrequently is the educator of the future awarded broad knowledge of children's literature during her studies at the college. Currently no study program has been designated for the connection between children's literature and sustainability and its derivatives and a method of integrating this subject into the field of literature. Due to the importance of children's literature in the assimilation of values and instilling of an ideological infrastructure which will become a way of life, it is appropriate to examine the findings of literary works in literature textbooks and before this the outline of the subject in the syllabus. One should introduce environmental studies into existing subjects and introduce environmental studies as a new subject in the syllabus.

Key words: Children's literature, education of sustainability, education of environment, children's literature as a means of socializing

Introduction

Nature is the art of God (Sir Thomas Browne)
Nature to be commanded must be obeyed (Francis Bacon)
There is no forgiveness in nature (Ugo Betti)

The ecological crises/disasters which have befallen the world have created an increasing awareness of sustainability in institution in Israel such as the Ministry for Protection of the Environment and others such as the Standards Institute, the army, voluntary organizations.

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In spite of the recognition by Ministry of Education and for Protection of the Environment urgent need to set up a working program for implementation of issues regarding the quality of the environment into the educational system. Environmental education is still not perceived as a potential subject in the school curricula. An organizing foundation which requires an innovative school model for its application is needed. Under the heading of ecology one can count 76 children's books. In particular one should note the work of Ran Levy Yamouri, which is dedicated to promoting books with an ecological orientation, some of which are written bilingually, Hebrew-Arabic. Together with the growing awareness about sustainability the question still remains: How can this subject be integrated into literature studies in teachers' training? Currently no study program has been designated for the connection between children's literature and sustainability and its derivatives and a method of integrating this subject into the field of literature.

The term ecology is one of the most focal terms in the political, social and cultural, educational and philosophical discourse in current times. The environmental debate (or ecological in the broad sense of the term) has intensified based on the fear of a man-made ecological holocaust. The environmental debate including its many derivatives is a fire in the belly of current global culture: for several the call for a green environment, for protection of nature and sustainability is a central issue in a culture observing its self-destruction, and for others this is no more than a passing fashion statement (Hotem, 2010). We wish to examine the importance of children's books dealing with nature and ecology, and whether their availability on the shelf is an action that should be mediated by adults. This follows the political, educational and cultural debate between scientific approaches which aspire to discuss the preservation of nature, solely and only in functional contexts of the ecosystem and cultural approaches which adopt a normative approach as regards the protection of nature, an approach that combines social interest, aesthetic sensitivity, historical awareness and ethical judgment of man as 'a scenic mould of his native land' (Hotem, 2010). In this paper I wish to express the voice of teaching as a tool; the belief in the foundation of the next generation of agents of socialism. I wish to demonstrate how an available tool, which is also effective, can illuminate the debate in the teaching process from all its aspects.

The Outline of Educational Policies on the Issue of Quality of the Environment

The policy of the Ministry of Education is to deal with the subject of the quality of the environment and the subject of ecology and sustainability in general; the field of literature in particular is located within the general program. I wish to focus on books that have been written for children with the understanding that literature is an impetus for assimilation of social ethics. Therefore, it is appropriate to examine the findings of books dealing with nature conservation, particularly in the light of the memorandum which was submitted to the Education Committee (2006) and in the light of data recorded by Court and Rosental (2006) as regards the small number of literary works dealing with the subject of quality of the environment in school textbooks. In her study she notes love of nature and conservation of the environment as leading values. The value of the love of the people and the country appeared in 7.31% of responses relating to the important values in textbooks. In one sentence the writer summarizes the value of 'love of nature' and the value of 'preservation of the environment': "This value reinforces the understanding of the importance of the love of nature for mankind, the need for environmental conservation and the love of animals" (Court & Rosental, 2007, p. 28). However, the disparity between the treatment of it and reading about it in textbooks should be examined. As the syllabi "constitute the consolidation of the knowledge, skills and beliefs that a certain society sees appropriate to expose to the generation of students, and the methods of implementing them within diverse educational frameworks that the society establishes and makes available to the student" (Alpert, 2002, p.

28), the issue of children's literature as an additional tool in the overall process should be examined. Also as the syllabus programming is a series of actions during which selections are made, allocations, creation and evaluation of educational outcomes and the means of achieving them, in the light of the forecast of social desires (Schremer & Bailey, 2001). Rosenthal notes that it is possible to construct the syllabus according to the educational perception and unique needs of each school or population (Rosenthal, 2006). Therefore children's literature could serve as an infrastructure for literacy, as noted by Elkad-Lehman, and Greensfeld (2008). This as in her opinion too in the teachers training system a number of unique tools have been developed for the development of awareness in the choice of literary works based on psychological, emotional, linguistic and literary considerations. Moreover, the number of study hours for children's literature in the colleges for education is very limited, and only infrequently is the educator of the future awarded broad knowledge of children's literature during her studies at the college. The lack of comprehensive knowledge and in-depth understanding of children's literature sometimes causes the mediator to be tempted to choose a text which can be 'understood immediately' – a popular text or one with simple language and content, without literary or psychological depth thus renouncing a complex and superior text from the literary aspect, which could have added worth in assimilation of values. Superior texts, which touch on the quality of the environment and sustainability, include an abundance of information in a focused field, whereby it is important to recognize not only the central concept at its foundation but rather also the profusion of terms which expand the subject. It is therefore appropriate to treat the status of children's books dealing in the subject of preservation of nature with a level of appropriate gravity. Perhaps specifically the study process which occurs outside of the formal framework will help the students understand this important value and eventually enjoy it for its own sake!

Children's Literature as a Means of Socializing

A book is one of the cultural programming channels as a consequence of it being the obvious outcome of the culture in which it was published. Society is, the total of the issues from which it is comprised, and its countenance is therefore the product of the individual members of the generation. Thereby also the literary work which deals with the personal and the intimate – has a social orientation. The creating individual, with all his subjective baggage, functions in a society and expresses this whether knowingly or not (Harel, 1992). Regev (1992) adds that literary works for children, during all times, reflect in one way or another ideology and the values of the society in which they are written. Regev emphasizes that children's literature was always perceived as one of the clear means for educating and training the young reader. Through the means of narrative and poem messages were conveyed that the society wished to convey. In fact, those same central values that the government and its agents wished to offer to children were emphasized so that they, when the time came, would be effective and obedient citizens. Children's literature is operated and distributed on the basis of faith, whereby if there is a place for effective links between literature and society, then it will naturally be found first in children's literature. For the most part children's literature is goal directed and amongst its targets is the assimilation of socio-cultural values. The above mentioned values refer to three points in time: past, present and future: the traditional values of the past, the valid ethics of the present and the aspiration to provide values for the children of the present with the vision that they will make society better in the future when they receive civil status (Stephens, 1992). The mimetic perception maintains that the literary work of art is a 'testimony' or a 'reflection' of the social condition -

the historical national condition; it is an ideological transparency of a world-view, of the linguistic status or the state of the art in the period in which it was written. Therefore by means of the focused literary work on the subject one can examine the social-cultural reality, the Israeli current reality, in which way and which method reality is represented and reflected in a literary work.

On the assumption that textbooks are one of the important tools for conveying ethical messages and for structuring the social reality of the students (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991; Helinger & Brooks, 1991), then accordingly one can also see in literature written for children an aesthetic-didactic objective, by way of examination of the cultural-ideological code of the society.

Furthermore, while literature circumvents the obstacles of the objection, it constitutes a means of bibliotherapy by training the hearts to absorb the messages that the story is conveying to its readers and listeners. As this is a mediatory method it enables observation of the heroes of the story and facilitates preparation of cognitive and emotional processing without a personal connection and as an analogy of internalizing messages. The story helps the process of acquisition of norms (in particular in children). The process of acquisition of norms is carried out within the reciprocal activity with the fellow man. The perception of intangible terms is possible only if the child has a social interaction which will lead him to experience a clash with these terms. An additional significance of children's literature is that due to the structure of the plot of the literary work, the text utilizes prior knowledge and experience in order to realize the process of comprehension (Shimrom, 1989). Therefore, stories based on familiar scenarios create a high level of interpretation. Moreover, if the texts correlate between new knowledge and prior knowledge, a process is created of encoding and of drawing conclusions over and above the text itself.

The Contents Observed in Children's Literature Dealing with the Quality of the Environment

Over and above the linguistic, cognitive, emotional and social objectives, the ecological story is a means of expanding global knowledge as a way of life. In the field of ecology it is important to base knowledge on the world so that the reader will appreciate what exists in it and preserve it. Preservation of nature and the landscape is not just an intangible value or a sterile statement: this value represents the creation of a quality of life corner for each individual, and within this framework will teach the reader to safeguard the resources of nature: water, land, air, sea and heritage sites.

As part of the expansion of knowledge, ecological literature explains how ecological research is trying to uncover and understand the species of the processes taking place in the habitat from all aspects. It describes the complex validity of the environmental conditions (Cohen, 1983), such as for instance the size of the populations or the location of a certain gender in a certain place or lack of them in another place. There are some very clear phenomena: we know, of course, that fish live in water and not on land. However there are more complex and sophisticated phenomena, which cannot be identified at first glance. Another objective is the provision of knowledge about what is similar and different in the ecosystems in various places in the world (Cohen, 1983), whereby a tropical rain forest in the area of the equator is not similar to the tundra in North Alaska. What is the ruling authority in both these conditions? Is there anything shared by all the ecosystems in the world? The stories emphasise the great importance determined by the ability to forecast in advance the results of environmental changes. What will happen if the forest is cut down if it is a virgin forest? What will the ramifications be on the environment, on the organisms that existed in the forest, on the flora, on the fauna, on the soil, on the water and perhaps on the climate? Are these changes created due to human intervention in all the environmental processes? It

is very important to be aware of the consequences of these changes. Poetical definitions are given in literary works to the term ecology and an abundance of terms have been revealed which has become a dictionary of ecological terms. The reader learns to understand the difference between rehabilitation, which is the return of the land to productive use after a disruption, and reclamation which is an attempt to return the destroyed natural system to some kind of productive state or a productive state which is acceptable to the public, and the option of reusing it – not specifically an attempt to return it to its former status or necessarily to use original components. The reader learns to differentiate between restoration and repair of the entire ecosystem, about functional connections and conservation, and preservation of the natural systems which have not been harmed or were harmed relatively little. The objective of conservation is to prevent harmful situations. Furthermore, the reader learns about recycling. Literature emphasizes the factors accountable in each field, and most importantly, in addition to knowledge it becomes a tool for education of the reader to preserve the quality of the environment. Literature serves or shall serve as an agent of change (Dar, 2008), whereby with proper education and direction in the pre-schools and lower grades the children will put pressure on parents from below and on their adult environment and dictate a new code of conduct.

So what really is the Function of Teachers' Training?

Based on an awareness of the far reaching changes which have occurred in the world as regards ecology and the changes of the public's treatment of environmental problems and their effect on the syllabi, Blum (2006) reviews 35 years of development of syllabi on the quality of the environment in Israel. In a paper of this name he details what has occurred in the State of Israel on this issue throughout the years. Between dogma and theory he emphasizes what should be done with the syllabi to promote the subject: in his opinion, there are four ways of integrating a new subject into the syllabus of the formal education system, and in all matters relating to environmental studies, which are:

1. To renew an old fashioned subject by integrating it with environmental studies.
2. To introduce environmental studies into existing subjects.
3. To introduce environmental studies as a new subject in the syllabus.
4. To introduce environmental studies as a group into a new study field.

It is the obligation of adults to bequeath to their children and to encourage them in the love of the environment and the responsibility of preserving nature and the Earth. From Blum's paper it becomes clear that it is possible to teach quality of the environment in every discipline, however the place of literature as an integrator in this matter is absent from the paper. Due to the importance of children's literature in the assimilation of values and instilling of an ideological infrastructure which will become a way of life, it is appropriate to examine the findings of literary works in literature textbooks and before this the outline of the subject in the syllabus. The literary abundance could contribute to the introduction of the term preservation of the environment not only by a brainwashing process but rather by the tools available in literature written for children.

In conclusion, as set out by Golden (2010, p. 141), "Stories are very powerful cultural practices which are formulated by reality and at the same time contribute to its design". Therefore it is impossible to disregard the importance of literature written for children on the subject and it should be instilled as part of the teaching process. And as such it is an incentive for assimilation of values and provision of ideological infrastructure and is a means of educating to a way of life without brainwashing. The literary abundance could contribute

to the introduction of environmental conservation via experience, and by a learning modifier, however these are the tools of literature. When training teachers we should instil and imbue the love of the environment and teach them how to take responsibility for preservation of nature and the Earth and thereby to nurture the process of providing tools for those studying teaching.



Biographical statement

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