

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Critical Reading of Stories in the Preparatory Education Curriculum: An Analytical Study of the Algerian School System

Dr. Hamza Laifaoui

Ecole Normal Supérieure de Laghouat (Algeria)

Email : laifaouihamza@ens-lagh.dz

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Abstract

Children's stories are regarded as a compelling means of expression. It has a strong effect on the refinement and improvement of children's behavior and feelings. In addition, it is a crucial factor in the educational process and its construction, as it does not differ from the stories that are aimed for grown ups where it may include events, stories, times, places, plots, a climax, and a resolution; however, the narrator should make all these elements easier to suit the age group of children so that they will be able to understand and sense the stories.

That said, this study aims to present a critical reading of children's stories that are inserted in the language activities textbooks in preparatory education books, and it seeks to answer some questions like: what are the aims and objectives of the stories in textbooks? What are the disadvantages of these stories?

Keywords: Children's literature, story, content, form, style

Introduction

The child is regarded as the wealth of the present, the cornerstone of the future, and the hope of societies in their pursuit of glory and the establishment of civilizations. Consequently, prioritizing the care, upbringing, and education of the child is an imperative; it prepares them for the responsibilities they will eventually undertake. What we instill in our children today is precisely what we shall harvest tomorrow, whether for good or ill. From this perspective,

the profound importance of the child and everything associated with their development becomes clear.

Because literature represents one of the primary cultural conduits through which fresh intellectual air reaches the child's mind, our focus on it must be significant. It is an essential tool for embedding a constellation of religious, social, ethical, national, and cognitive values. Literature facilitates the integration of practical life skills and the development of a balanced personality. When structured effectively, literature ensures that the child does not become a social burden, but rather a constructive member of society who poses no threat to the world.

The story occupies a preeminent position in children's literature. Children naturally gravitate toward stories and find immense enjoyment in them, whether they are heard or read. They are drawn to the characters and events, which stimulate their emotions, spark their imaginations, and influence their attitudes and behaviors. This occurs through the ideas the stories present and the themes they treat, provided they are delivered in a style that aligns with the child's cognitive, psychological, and linguistic perceptions and abilities.

Furthermore, the story provides the child with an "intellectual provision," helping them identify various objects and concepts. It introduces them to diverse personalities from different times and places ¹, which broadens their imagination and expands their horizons.

This growth is furthered through interaction with others, fostering a capacity for critical thinking and innovation.

In this study, we seek to provide a critical reading of the stories included in the Language Activity Workbooks for preparatory education in Algeria. We examine their suitability for the children's linguistic and psychological levels, investigate their thematic content and structural shortcomings, and explore the factors that contribute to the success of a narrative. The descriptive-analytical methodology has been employed as the primary tool for investigating these topics.

01. The Importance of the Story for the Child

The narrative aimed at children has garnered significant attention across ages and eras. It serves as a vessel for human experiences and expertise, transmitting them to others while often being cloaked in imagination. At times, it serves as a direct expression of reality. In both instances, the story sheds light on many aspects of life and its complexities; indeed, it may be considered a form of history for individuals and eras, or perhaps, history itself is a story.

Despite the rapid technological advancements in various fields of knowledge, the children's story has maintained a distinguished status. It has benefited from modern developments in printing and media, which have helped produce stories in visually attractive, colorful forms, augmented by integrated audiovisual effects.

The primary objective of the story is to provide pleasure, entertainment, and wonder, followed secondarily by education. Therefore, the storyteller must meticulously track the manifestations of sadness, anxiety, regret, and joy that fluctuate within the child's psyche. The story is an ideal vehicle for the release of suppressed desires, as children often become deeply attached to characters who embody their hopes and who, more often than not, experience only happiness and goodness².

Thus, the story is not merely an educational tool; it is a comprehensive vessel for cultural

dissemination. It carries ideas, perceptions, and scientific, historical, literary, geographical, psychological, social, and religious information. It offers a vast array of ethical values and visions that nourish the child's mind, leaving a lasting impression on their memory. These elements remain rooted in the child's consciousness well beyond the childhood stage. This highlights the true importance of the story: it distinguishes between various values and themes, allowing the child to accept the positive aspects and reject the negative ones.

Based on the aforementioned, we can conclude that the story holds immense significance in a child's life. Scientists regard it as one of the most effective educational methods because it carries human experiences and transfers them to others, often wrapped in imagination or expressed as stark reality. Moreover, it serves as an entertaining medium that sparks curiosity within the child's soul.

02. Presentation of the "Language Activities" Workbook

This workbook was developed in accordance with the official curriculum of the Algerian Ministry of National Education, specifically designed for the preparatory education cycle. It targets children between the ages of 5 and 6. The workbook serves as a support for the competencies a child builds through various educational situations, preparing them for the transition to the first year of primary school. It contains a diverse and integrated set of exercises that address the foundational requirements of the curriculum while respecting the child's developmental characteristics. The workbook consists of the following activities:

Reading: 40 exercises.

Planning and Writing: 25 exercises.

Stories: 5 narratives.

The focus of this study is on these five stories, most of which feature talking animals or natural elements. They are sequenced as follows:

Story 1: The Goat and the Wolf

"A mother goat was about to go to the market. She warned her kids not to open the door for

anyone until she returned. A wicked wolf was eavesdropping and heard her instructions. After she left, the wolf went to the door and tried to mimic her voice, saying: 'Open the door, my children, I have returned!' However, when they opened the door, he lunged at them and ate them. When the mother returned and realized the fate of her children, she went to the wolf's house and found him asleep. She took a pair of scissors and thread, cut open his belly, and rescued her kids. She then filled his stomach with heavy stones and sewed it back up. When the wolf woke up, he felt incredibly thirsty and ran to the well to drink; the weight of the stones pulled him in, and he drowned.³

Story 2: The Sun and the Wind

"One day, the Sun and the Wind met. They began to argue over who was more powerful: Gentleness or Force? The Wind said: 'I can prove I am stronger. Look at that traveler; I will force him to take off his cloak.' The Wind began to blow with great ferocity, but the harder it blew, the tighter the traveler wrapped the cloak around himself. Eventually, the Wind gave up. Then the Sun said, 'Now, watch me. I will use gentleness and warmth.' The Sun began to shine its rays gradually. The traveler soon felt the warmth and voluntarily removed his cloak. Thus, wisdom and gentleness triumphed over harshness and force."⁴

Story 3: The Little Red Hen and the Grain of Wheat

"One autumn morning, the farm birds went out to bathe and play, except for the Red Hen, who isolated herself to search for food until she found a grain of wheat. She called her friends to help her plant it, but they ignored her and went back to their games. After the stalks grew, she asked for their help in harvesting, but again they refused. The Red Hen relied on herself and performed all the work alone. In the evening, she baked delicious bread from the harvest. When the other birds smelled the aroma and gathered around her, she reminded them of their previous refusal to work and denied them a share of the

bread. Realizing their mistake, they promised to work and cooperate in the future."⁵

Story 4: The Donkey and the Wolf

"While a donkey was grazing in a field, a hungry wolf approached, intending to eat him. The donkey quickly thought of a plan and said, 'Please, remove the thorn stuck in my hoof before you eat me, so it doesn't hurt your throat.' As the wolf leaned down to search for the thorn, the donkey delivered a powerful kick to the wolf's mouth, knocking out all his teeth. Thus, the wolf was no longer able to hunt or eat animals."⁶

Story 5: Hani and the Pets

"Hani loves pets: the cat that catches mice, the loyal dog that guards the house, and the parrot that mimics speech all day. In the evening, he enjoys watching his beautiful, colorful fish swimming peacefully in the water. But his favorite of all is the [...] which always hides its head out of fear."⁷

03. Aims and Objectives of the Stories in the Workbook

The stories included in the preparatory language workbook serve multiple functional objectives aimed at developing the child's behavior and psyche across various dimensions:

A. The Cognitive Dimension

Knowledge Acquisition: Helping the child gain information and instilling sound moral values and principles.

The Goat and the Wolf: Teaches obedience to parents and heeding their advice.

The Sun and the Wind: Demonstrates the triumph of wisdom and gentleness over brute force.

The Little Red Hen: Emphasizes the importance of labor, self-reliance, and cooperation.

The Donkey and the Wolf: Showcases the victory of intelligence over treachery and deception.

Hani and the Pets: Teaches kindness to animals. Cognitive Development: Expanding the child's imagination and capacity for visualization.

Mental Processing: Enhancing the ability to remember, memorize, pay attention, and focus.

Linguistic Logic: Developing the skill of following a logical sequence of ideas.

Auditory Skills: Improving listening and comprehension skills.

B. The Social Dimension

Equipping the child with social communication skills.

Developing social habits such as generosity, cooperation, love, altruism, sacrifice, honesty, and loyalty.

Cultivating behavioral, ethical, and social values.

Fostering spiritual awareness, an appreciation for beauty, and a thirst for knowledge.

C. The Psychological Dimension

Nurturing feelings of kindness and compassion by encouraging empathy with the vulnerable characters in the stories.

Providing a healthy outlet for the child's creative potential.

Identifying with life's various situations and challenges.

Learning from the experiences and trials of others.

04. Deficiencies and Shortcomings of the Curriculum Stories

Based on my previous experience in primary education, specifically five years of teaching the preparatory cycle, I have observed several critical points regarding these narratives:

Developmental Incongruity: These stories are often presented in a manner that does not align with the age or cognitive level of these children. One striking observation is that four out of the five stories are adapted from global/Western fables, while only one is from a local context.

Neglect of Cultural Heritage: This raises a fundamental question: Has our own Arab and Islamic heritage become so devoid of stories that curriculum designers must resort to international fables? Many of these global stories do not align with the child's existing cognitive framework and, in some cases, even contradict their cultural values (such as the themes in *The Sun and the Wind*).

The Over-Reliance on Fables: While the curriculum focuses heavily on talking animal stories (fables), which children admittedly enjoy, the current selection is insufficient. There is a notable absence of other vital narrative genres that are equally appealing to this age group, such as:

Heroic and Adventure Tales: Stories that emphasize courage, chivalry, and the triumph of good over evil, providing children with purposeful educational values.

Folklore and Popular Tales: These stories represent the identity of a society, reflecting its authenticity and preserving its collective memory, thereby strengthening the child's bond with their community.

Historical Narratives: Stories aimed at fostering a sense of national belonging and providing positive archetypes for children to emulate.

Humorous Stories: These are essential for emotional well-being, as they relieve anxiety and foster a positive atmosphere between the teacher and the students.

Religious Stories: These aim to instill Islamic values through the lives of the Prophets and the righteous, providing children with a moral compass without descending into overly abstract or complex concepts.

The Paradox of Text vs. Image: The visual presentation of these stories presents a significant pedagogical contradiction. The curriculum places more emphasis on the written text than on the illustrations. However, at this developmental stage, children are generally pre-literate; they cannot read or even recognize the individual shapes of letters. Why, then, is the written word given precedence over the image? This imbalance fails to capture the child's attention and ignores the fact that the image is the primary medium through which a five-year-old "reads" the world.

Inappropriate Pedagogical Competencies: In the stories of "The Goat and the Wolf" and "The Sun and the Wind," the targeted competencies involve describing and sequencing narrative

elements. However, the workbook asks the child to sequence events and ideas in a way that is cognitively taxing for their age. Many children at this stage have not yet mastered the fine motor skills required to hold scissors properly or follow a complex logical sequence.

Abstract Cognitive Demands: In the story of "The Little Red Hen," the targeted competency is to "imagine and draw an alternative ending." This is a "teaching-up" approach that exceeds the capabilities of most preparatory-level children. How can a child, who has not yet learned the basics of storytelling or artistic representation, be expected to mentally construct a new conclusion and then illustrate it?

The Absence of Visual Engagement: Most stories in the workbook fail to utilize "Auditory-Visual" elements. In modern education, visuals are not just supplementary; they are the primary driver of attention. The lack of dynamic, engaging illustrations means that the workbook misses a crucial opportunity to stimulate the child's interest and sustain their focus.

05. Factors for Making Stories Suitable for Children

To achieve the desired educational competencies, three fundamental factors must be present in children's stories. Unfortunately, these elements are often lacking in the current Algerian Language Activity workbooks: Form, Style, and Content.

A. Form (Visual Layout and Presentation)

The physical and visual structure of a story, from the cover to the internal illustrations, is the first point of contact for a child. Visuals are a major draw; they entice the child to "read" the images and contemplate their details. As the proverb suggests, "An image is worth a thousand words."

The Role of the Image: Illustrations help the child form a mental "map" of the story, but images that provide clarity when words fail should be less frequently used as children grow⁸. For the preparatory stage, images must be vibrant, clear, and modern.

The Power of Color: Language allows for a symbolic exchange through words, but images offer a universal language of shapes and colors. These visuals speak directly to the child's subconscious and emotional mind.

Criteria for Effective Visuals: Some factors should be present when using images in children's stories; among them are⁹:

They must be developmentally appropriate for the child's age and grade level.

They must be expressive, clear, and high-quality.

They should stimulate curiosity and encourage discussion.

They must be structurally cohesive with the narrative.

In the current curriculum, the images tend to be superficial. They lack aesthetic depth and fail to create a cohesive "world" for the child. While printing technologies have advanced significantly, the art direction of these textbooks remains stagnant, failing to use images as an effective pedagogical tool.

B. Style (The Narrative Voice):

The narrative style is the primary vehicle for capturing a child's imagination. A successful story uses suspense, vivid imagery, and a rhythm that connects events logically. For the preparatory stage, the language must be tailored to the child's linguistic and psychological maturity.

The Role of the Narrator: The storyteller must have a deep understanding of the child's needs¹⁰.
Style Requirements:

Imagination: Stories should transport children to historical eras or fantastical worlds, using archetypes like animals, heroes, and personified natural elements.

Clarity of Title: The title should be derived from the child's environment and be evocative rather than frightening. For example, the "Sun and Wind" story is too abstract; it would be more effective if replaced by a narrative rooted in the child's actual lived experience or cultural heritage.

The Core Idea: A good story must have a clear "mission" or moral that is accessible, deep but not simplistic, profound but not ambiguous.

C. Content (Thematic Substance):

The content of a story encompasses the ideas, themes, and values it conveys. According to academic standards, the content must align with the objectives of reading, such as comprehension, analysis, and the acquisition of skills¹¹. A high-quality narrative seeks to meet the child's desires and inclinations while carefully selecting themes that suit their specific environment. Several key dimensions must be considered:

- Ethical and Moral Values

Ethical values are defined as a set of principles, rules, and ideals that a society believes in and uses as a barometer to judge behavior, distinguishing between right and wrong, good and evil, and the beautiful and the ugly. These values are rooted in the collective social conscience.

Humanitarian and Social Values: These include the universal standards of truth, goodness, and beauty, alongside specific virtues such as honesty, justice, and tolerance.

Social Interaction: Stories should foster the child's relationship with others through themes of cooperation and mutual respect.

Epistemological Ethics: This includes scientific curiosity, accuracy, and objectivity.

National and Civilizational Identity: Themes of patriotism, citizenship, and the willingness to sacrifice for the common good. In the context of the Algerian curriculum, a story must instill these ethical values to help build a balanced student character. When a child identifies with noble characters, it positively impacts their psychological well-being and social integration.

However, a fundamental question remains: Why have curriculum designers turned to global fables while neglecting Islamic and Arabic narratives? Global stories often reflect a different cultural psyche. In contrast, Islamic and Arabic heritage is rich with stories that cultivate both the individual and the community

simultaneously, a necessary foundation given the cultural challenges facing today's youth.

- The Cognitive (Epistemological) Dimension:

Every story should carry a cognitive "weight" that it intends to transmit to the child. The narrator must account for the child's specific circumstances and the technological resources available. Modern education now utilizes diverse visual and auditory aids (computers, interactive media) that allow children to engage with stories more dynamically.

Knowledge acquisition in the early years relies heavily on the senses. As Ibn Khaldun famously noted, "Hearing is the father of all faculties." A child who is a "good listener" becomes a good learner. Therefore, when a narrator uses prosody, intonation, and rhythm, the child enters the world of the story and is influenced by it, especially when the narrative is infused with cognitive substance.

Unfortunately, the stories currently in the workbook lack this robust cognitive dimension. There is a missed opportunity to use narrative techniques (intonation, pacing, and suspense) to help children internalize information. Instead, the stories are often characterized by brevity and a lack of depth in event development.

Conclusion

If the objectives are clear, the path toward achieving them becomes easier. The children's story is the "first building block" that nourishes the mind, sparks the imagination, and bolsters knowledge. However, its effectiveness depends on the quality of its delivery and its resonance with the child's inner world.

Based on this study, the following results and recommendations have been reached:

Pedagogical Misalignment: The stories currently included in the preparatory Language Activity workbooks do not fully align with the needs, desires, or cognitive levels of the children.

Lack of Contextual Awareness: There is a failure to account for the child's specific environment, age, and the external factors (media, culture) that shape their world.

Cultural Dissonance: Curriculum designers should avoid the wholesale adoption of global fables that may carry philosophical or cultural "baggage" foreign to the child's heritage. Instead, they should draw from the vast Arabic and Islamic heritage, which is rich in history, folklore, and moral guidance.

The Dominance of the Image: In the preparatory stage, children are visually oriented. The workbook should prioritize high-quality, meaningful illustrations over written text. The current reliance on text for non-reading children is a pedagogical contradiction.

Cognitive Overload: Some of the tasks associated with the stories (such as imagining alternative endings or identifying written words) are beyond the developmental capacity of a five-year-old.

Need for Specialization: The authorship and design of these workbooks should be entrusted to specialists in children's literature, psychology, and educational technology to ensure that the content is both engaging and scientifically sound.

In summary, the stories in the Algerian preparatory curriculum require a comprehensive 07- ons, Algeria.

review. They must transition from being "fillers" in a workbook to becoming vibrant, culturally-rooted, and visually-stimulating tools that truly contribute to the development of the child's skills in listening, speaking, and creative thinking.

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¹ Mohammed Al-Sayed Halawa, The Narrative Literature for Children, 2nd ed. (Alexandria: Modern University Office, 2003), pp. 07–08.

² Mohammed Al-Sayed Halawa, The Narrative Literature for Children, (Op. Cit.), pp. 24–31.

³ Language Activity Workbook for Preparatory Education, (Algeria: National Office for School Publications, Ministry of National Education, 2018/2019), p. 16.

⁴ Ibid., p. 28.

⁵ Ibid., p. 46.

⁶ Ibid., p. 58.

⁷ Ibid., p. 70.

⁸ Jaafar Abdel-Razzaq, Children's Literature, (Beirut: Arab Writers Union Publications, 1979), p. 449.

⁹ Mohammed Sabah, Technology of Educational Media, 1st ed. (Amman: Dar Al-Yazouri Scientific for Publishing and Distribution, 1998), p. 62.

¹⁰ Hassan Shehata, Arab Children's Literature: Studies and Research, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Egyptian Lebanese House, 1994), pp. 28–29.

¹¹ Amal Hamdi Dakkak, The Story in Children's Magazines and its Role in Socialization, (Damascus: Syrian General Organization for Books, 2012), p. 47.