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Social issues in children picturebook apps and their reception by the parents of children in early education

Summary

The aim of the paper was to assess the growing interest – among both the general public and academia – in the phenomenon of picturebook apps, i.e. products for children dedicated to mobile devices with touchscreens. As the object of interest 4 picturebook apps were chosen, which in different ways present topics connected with social issues (exclusion, sexuality, "otherness"). A selected sample of pre-school children parents were presented with the apps and then interviewed (qualitative research) in order to collect their opinions regarding both the apps and the topics raised in their content. The acquired data documents different attitudes towards the apps – ranging from very open to close minded.

Key words: app picturebooks, parents, children, social issues, iPad

Słowa klucze: aplikacje książkowe, rodzice, dzieci, problemy społeczne, iPad

Introduction

The aim of the article is twofold: first it is to present and describe what is still a new cultural phenomenon – a sample of chosen children picturebook apps, whose contents deal with different social issues, such as 'otherness', exclusion, homosexuality, and different family models. These apps are not very popular among adults – as in case of many contemporary picturebooks – because of their challenging, controversial and unconventional subject (Janet, 2015). The apps were found and selected mainly through an analysis of the lists of either awarded (with special attention given to the results of the Bologna Digital Ragazzi Award) or recommended ("Circus Review") picturebook apps. The result of our research – however modest – offers an interesting sample in terms of presenting a variety of different approaches to the idea of picturebook apps. It should be stressed, however, that the presented apps are not very popular in Poland yet – not only because of their price (or

the price of the hardware – tablets, smartphones), but also due to the controversial topics they address (though the same might be said about printed picturebooks).

The second aim of the article is to present the results of a limited empirical research project, designed and executed in order to collect knowledge on the reception of previously selected apps among a group of parents of children between 5 and 11 years of age. This research was conducted in May 2015, as a part of the project NCN 2013/09/B/HS6/03091, called "M-parents and m-kids. Wireless socialization and learning in digital culture". The sample of responses was acquired through qualitative interviews – which included a presentation of the apps – with 4 married couples. The main attention was given to the role of the adult intermediary between these applications and children, specifically in the context of the differentiated approach to children's usage of new technologies, and – in what the research contributes – the role of a divided approach to including or excluding social and also political issues in the children's developmental environment.

Contexts of importance of digital picturebooks

In May 2010 the publisher Winged Chariot released *Emma loves Pink*, generally considered to be the first picturebook for the iPad (Schons 2011: 2). As another important product, which shaped the history of picturebooks apps, *The heart and a bottle* by Oliver Jeffers, published later in the same year (December) should be mentioned. This product achieved the status of a bestseller very quickly (Zając, 2013). The next (perhaps indirect!) cornerstone of establishing picturebook apps as a recognisable medium was the launching of The Bologna Ragazzi Digital Award, which is "dedicated to apps inspired by children's books, otherwise known as narrative driven interactive media". And despite the fact that picturebook apps are not openly mentioned, the lists of winning apps always includes outstanding examples of the genre in question (two of them will be presented below). In this glimpse at the history of children's book apps one must not omit also the product that cannot be described as a picturebook app, but which contributed greatly to spreading the idea of publishing literature as an iPad app, i.e. *Alice in Wonderland* issued in 2010, still very popular today, and considered as a pattern for future apps of this kind (Alice in Wonderland 2010).

Nowadays e-reading has definitely ceased to be a unique phenomenon, only associated with small populations of more affluent and/or tech savvy individuals. Specifically in the United States or Western European countries the percentage of persons using different devices (e-readers, tablets, smartphones, laptops, etc.) for educational, professional or leisure-related contact with literature is very high. And children are no exception. A survey carried out in the US by one of the world's leading publishers (Scholastic) in 2014 confirms this opinion. As the survey shows "…*the percentage of children who have read an ebook has increased across all age groups since 2010 (25% vs. 61%* [2014 MC and MZ])" Moreover in the group of younger kids (6–8) the growth is even more impressive, i.e. 28 vs. 68% (Scholastic 2014: 7). But what makes the discussed issue even more important is not the

quantitative factor, but rather that more and more often e-reading creates the first, and therefore the most formative contacts between the child and the text. For a significant number of the youngest kids "… digital picturebooks are often the first literature young children engage with" (Al-Yaqout, Nikolajeva 2015: 1). It should be mentioned that in Poland children's (as well as adult's) e-reading is growing significantly more slowly. The last national children's reading survey conducted by Zofia Zasacka and her team even completely ignored the phenomenon of digital reading (Zasacka 2014). It is believed however that in the near future the rate of e-reading in Poland will follow the pattern of western countries.

In line with Al-Yaqout's and Nikolajeva's opinions that digital picturebooks and their reception are of major importance, they shall be the main focus of this article. According to some researchers, these modern e-versions of their highly successful printed predecessors are responsible for the upcoming revolution in children's reading. Junko Yokota maintains that the "typical e-book read on a dedicated e-reader (Kindle, Nook) has not hit the children's literature world for elementary school child readers in a particularly big way but e-books and apps that incorporate text, illustration and interactive features […] often thought of as the e-equivalent to picture books – have become a major force" (Yokota, Teale 2014). Indeed, these products, which connect features absorbed from print, audio, video, and gaming are definitely more appealing to the youngest generation than digital copies of printed books in the .pdf or .epub formats. In addition, as Lisa Margarete Schons maintains (in her essay provocatively titled "Is the picture book dead? The rise of the iPad as a turning point in children's literature") that iPads and their picturebook apps had a specifically tremendous impact on the world of literature for the kids (Schons L.M. 2011). As such, book apps deserve to be analysed and discussed in many different aspects of their existence. Therefore it is definitely necessary to take this medium into account when social and political issues in kids' literature are considered.

Picturebook apps are a relatively new phenomenon and, as such, await to be analysed deeper and in a more detailed way. So far the scholarly literature devoted to this topic is rather modest, however some interesting articles have already been delivered (several examples were cited above), as well as a collection of articles (Digtal literature 2015). There are also trials of theorising the field and the phenomenon of picturebook apps (Yokota 2015; Al-Yaqout, Nikolajeva 2013). In Poland this topic has been left almost untouched except for a small number of texts by Małgorzata Cackowska (Cackowska 2013a, 2013b) and Michał Zając (Zając 2013).

Justification for the selected picturebook apps and their presentation

The picturebook, along with its subsequent electronic counterpart – the book app, has always fulfilled certain socially important functions. Since the 1970s, picturebooks have been a significant medium very broadly used for the communication of various problems in contemporary Western society, becoming a vital channel of transmission of culture, and of content involved in social change (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2015). Modern mobile

technology has created even more extensive possibilities for reaching a young audience with this content, mainly owing to the intuitive navigation involved and an the attractive form of becoming acquainted with it (Yokota 2015). The app *Clementine wants to know* (discussed below) is an excellent example as, while being one of the most technologically advanced examples discussed here, it gives the child an opportunity to extensively learn, experience, and analyse the process of human conception, and as a consequence, to develop appropriate ideas, such as the role of sex in this context. The problem which will be highlighted here is related to the importance of an adult intermediary (in this case parents) between the apps and the children. Our analysis will involve an exemplification of the formative discourses displayed in the parental practice of the power to either allow the children access to knowledge about the social world and the changes taking place within it, or to deny them such access.

The discussed nature of the content – social issues – of children's book apps is still not often raised. The range available is quite limited and does not offer much selection. In preparing the empirical research, as our subject we decided to use the following picturebook apps, which are available in English, since there are no such apps in Polish. The selected apps are purposefully presented below in the sequence dictated by the logic of the introduction of knowledge on otherness, distinctness, and the ways of solving related social problems.

Firstly parents were confronted with **Four little corners**, a product developed by the DADA Company in 2012, winner of many awards (including the Bologna Ragazzi Digital Award 2013) This app is dedicated to a younger audience (3–5), and through the most simple means of expression deals with the very fragile and complicated issue of "otherness". As the producer declares, it's "…an interactive story that teaches values such as friendship, integration and equality through geometric forms that arouse sympathy and emotion. Ideal to start a conversation about equality with children" (Four little corners 2012). The app transmits universal educational values (tolerance, equality, solidarity, etc.) in an entertaining way.

The message is offered here in a very simple way – 8 Circles and a Square (sub-children figures) are playing together in a field. But when it is time to enter a house (their home) the Square is not able to follow its round friends, despite all its efforts to re-shape! What can be done? Brutally cut off the corners of the Square with a saw? Then there is an idea – the door may be accommodated to the Square's capabilities. A change in schematic thinking, i.e. the rebuilding of the door to the playroom rather than the adjustment of "the other" to the conditions created by the group turns out to be the lucky solution. The app is not particularly interactive however – which is somehow typical for products that have originated from printed books (in this case *Four little corners* by Jérôme Ruillier).

The parents were subsequently shown **Love, the app** by Niño Studio (2014), the Bologna Digital Ragazzi Award recipient in 2014. The app is also based on a printed storybook (by Italian artist Gian Berto Vanni, first published in 1964). A little girl, who has lost her parents and all of a sudden has to start her life in an orphanage, is not a nice, cute, sweet

girl. Nobody understands her, and due to her – at first glance – vicious behaviour the small community of the shelter literally rejects her. She is left all alone with her pain. This app gives many interpretative opportunities, and – because of its narration and interactive navigation – is addressed to slightly older children. It requires concentration on a longer, more slowly flowing story, as well as patience in moving through it. The problem highlighted here also concerns being different, experiencing lack of social acceptance, and alienation. *Love, the app* is not an easy read (it is meant for readers between 9 and 11 years old); it offers sad feelings, and quite a grim mood, but provokes compassion and sympathy, raising understanding.

The third app presented to parents was ***Geoff and his two dads – Tomato Trouble***, which could be described as an attempt at creating a LGBT friendly narrative, with a specific focus given to the very sensitive issue of gay parenting. The story in the app is based on actual events and a real situation. Geoff is a cute but handicapped Jack Russell Terrier. He lives a happy life with the two men who love him in a cosy neighbourhood in Australia. "On a warm summer's day, Geoff and his best friend Sam decide to have a game of catch while staying cool under a neighbour's sprinkler. But things go wrong when some prize tomato plants get trampled and clean sheets get dragged through the mud. Fortunately, Geoff's two dads are on hand to save the day" (Geoff and his two dads 2013). The discussed app is moderately interactive, with colourful illustrations provided in a rather traditional way. The story itself is very simple, not focused either on the homosexuality of Geoff's "dads", or Geoff's disability. The app's crucial message on tolerance is implied by depicting just the regular, normal, decent life of a gay family/handicapped person. The authors of the application aimed at showing the normality of the situation, in which the protagonist requiring care (in this case a dog) has two fathers.

The last app which the interviewed parents were confronted with was ***Clementine Wants to Know: Where Do Babies Come From?***, developed by Puddle Tap Publishing Ltd., in 2014. This product is meant to be used by children aged 5 to 12 and their parents. The main purpose of this quasi narrative (but as a matter of fact educational/information) app is on the one hand to offer an explanation of the so called facts of life to children and endow them – on the other hand – with "instruction" on how to welcome home a new sibling. The story is presented from the point of view of a girl named Clementine, who is expecting a new sibling and who has lots of questions she wishes to ask.

In terms of delivery, this app is extremely polished, with some very well-designed graphics and animation. The sound effects and narration are also very clear and professional. The interactive elements are easy to navigate and the flow through the story and different activities is simply structured and well-paced.

The application *Clementine…* goes far in its openness, presenting various types of families to children. In the last part, the protagonist, who was born and brought up in a family composed of herself, her mother and father, and her newly and conventionally conceived brother, presents her friends. However, the app also includes representations of various types of families, into which children are born, or which they join in some other

way. There is an adoptive family (and it is openly said that homosexual pairs may also adopt children), there is a family in which the child was born via a surrogate mother, and there is a family in which the child was conceived through insemination, owing to a sperm donor (this family type was shown as heterosexual, but also as comprising two mothers). This type of reliable education on human sexuality, appropriate for a children's audience in terms of both form and language, is not available in Poland in any book for children or in any picturebook.

Concluding the presentation of the apps it should be noted that their content (specifically the social and political issues) may also be discussed on the "meta" level – they contribute to the discussion on the way children might/should be introduced to the most subtle and fragile – emotionally and culturally – aspects of adult life. This problem is widely discussed in the field of picturebook research, e.g. Sandra Beckett suggests, that artists of so-called challenging picturebooks 'respect children's ability to deal with controversial subjects that often alarm adult mediators' (Beckett 2015: 49).

Empirical research

The use of mobile devices and apps in the family context, as well as parental approaches are increasingly and frequently studied from different points of view by scholars, who are interested in e.g. the types of strategies adopted by parents with regard to the mobile technologies used by their children (Wartella 2013; Bougsiaa et al. 2015), parent-child interactions as they read print and digital books together (Chiong et al. 2013), or in parents' perceptions of the mobile technology use by preschool aged children (Genc 2014; Bąk 2015). There is also research still in progress on emergent literacy and shared reading picturebook apps in families (Aligas, Margallo 2015; Real, Correro 2015).

In our article the types of social reception of selected apps with contents concerning social and cultural change (socially sensitive issues) are illustrated with the results of a study performed on four pairs of parents. Interviews with each of the pairs were carried out separately. They lasted up to two hours. The first pair had two daughters aged 8 and 11, the second one had two sons aged 6 and 7, the third, a daughter aged 10 and a son aged 7, and the fourth a son aged 8. All the parents had higher education backgrounds, lived in cities, were employed, and their financial situation was good. At home, they used a variety of technologies, making tablets available to their children mainly for entertainment apps. The interviews were preceded with an introduction to the educational potential of the content of several applications available for various systems – mostly numerous picturebook apps. Despite the generally techno-enthusiastic rather than technophobic attitude of the subjects, none of them analysed the quality of the content of the apps before they installed them on their tablets for the children. They were aware of the existence of a large number of very high quality picturebook apps – even those available in Polish. One of the pairs has never logged-in to the shop run by their tablet system, which means that their children only used the applications installed by the system (usually the very popular Angry Birds,

Lego Ninja, or some other apps with rather primitive content). All the parents were highly interested in the presented apps, which were new to them, and were astonished by the wealth of available educational applications, and in particular the picturebook apps.

The logic behind the manner of presentation of the picturebook apps to the parents was also to show them the possibility of a gradual introduction to knowledge on difference and various models to their children: from fictitious geometrical figures to the real world of the children's life in social diversity. The questions which initiated the discussion on the apps focused on the importance of the values of the content presented to both the parents and their children. However the most important aspect was the attempt at a formulation of conditions for the possibility of an introduction of the selected apps so that their children might experience them.

In reaction to the content and form of the picturebook apps, all the interviewed parents expressed acceptance of the attempts to discuss the topics in the works for children (in all the technologically different versions), as well as an appreciation for the possibility to learn about such a form of education. The above can be found for example in the following statement:

> *…This interactive form adds attractiveness, because children like tablets!* [dad, interview 3]

However, when the parents were asked to determine the conditions for making the selected applications available to children, the group markedly polarised: the parents presented two approaches.

The first group included those (although the pairs did not always speak in one voice) for whom none of the content presented in the apps (even that concerning various forms of fertilisation or types of families) was taboo. They thought the material presented was as an original aid (also owing to the innovative and advanced technology such as that used in *Clementine…*) allowing them to let their children experience content of this kind. The parents from this group appreciated the logic behind the presentation of the apps to themselves, considering the steps taken to be appropriate and consistent for the introduction of the content in question. There are a number of comments that illustrate this approach:

> *…It is really cool* [about *Clementine…*], *as it takes the burden of explanation off parents who do not have the basic knowledge or abilities. Because it is very difficult to provide such information, especially here, in Poland, where there are no words, as things are always either vulgar or incomprehensible…* [dad, interview 4]

> *…Good, it is better for me not to have to tell the girls all these things!* [dad, interview 1]

> *…Showing the children adoptions by homosexual pairs can be controversial to many people (…), but I do not think that an application shown at this age could make my child want to start a homosexual family, ha-ha* [dad, interview 4]

and the mum's response:

> ...this story of conception and various families is told so very nicely, delicately, with such subtlety ...while at the same time so concretely! [mum, interview 4]

Conversations with the parents who represented such an approach also tended to develop towards general reflections on the social consequences of rejection, or the postponement of educating children about human sexuality with its different types and varieties. There were also some general remarks on the changing world and difficulties with following the process, and in particular the necessity to prepare children to understand the changes.

In the second group, although the first two applications presented raised no objections before being offered to their children, reviews of the subsequent ones showed primarily the parents' conservative attitude to otherness in the context of new family models and configurations. There are a number of examples:

> ...It is a very pretty book [the one about Geoff], but I don't really like it as a model. Do you know why? Because I do not accept such a model. There is such a trend somewhere out there in the world, but I don't want to show it to the boys (...) Nothing wrong was shown, but there is a dad and a dad, and it is not the way it is in the daily life (...) I like the traditional model and I want to show only this model to my children...[mum, interview 2]

This statement was supplemented by the husband:

> ...It is a pity that this story does not talk about a mum and a dad... [dad, interview 2]

> ...We do not initiate such conversations [the ones addressing homosexual pairs – M.C. and MZ' remark], but when this topic springs up, we try to explain that such situations happen [mum, interview 3].

and the dad's response:

> ...But you know what? The problem is that **I am not very tolerant as far as two dads are concerned** (...) My moral order is rather sceptical here... [dad, interview 3]

As a result of their attitude, the parents from this group stress that they would not make such picturebook apps available to children because of the fear that they could inspire unwanted interests. We also think that this concern is also determined by the fear of a frank conversation with the child, disclosing the motives behind one's attitude. There is a trace of a characteristic disruption in this discourse, which stems from conservative ideology. This disruption, meanwhile, discloses a lack of cohesion between the parents' declarations on the need to educate children about otherness (and the acceptance of such picturebook apps, which concern the fictitious world – *Four little corners*), and their authentic confession of non-acceptance of realistically shown homosexual parents, or non-conventional methods of human conception. Taking into account what some studies have shown, i.e.

that children acquire a "repository of cultural knowledge" (Harris 2012: 60) and trust what they learn from their parents (significant others), and that they are also sensitive to information about social norms and conventions gained in the family context, it seems that the attitude described above blocks the children's comprehensive understanding of the idea of respect towards otherness, and the acceptance of cultural and social changes taking place in modern societies.

Conclusions

Liberation discourses connected with liberal or radical ideology aiming at social change, in particular preparing children to be open to a diversity of visions of lifestyle, sexuality, and types of families are not popular in Poland. Indeed, we may even say that such discourses challenge the conservatism that dominates the political scene. The quoted parents' statements show – as Norman Fairclough put it – in what way the language, understood as a social practice of power, is reflected in social identities, in systems of power and beliefs, and social relations (Fairclough 2001). Depending on the type of family model, the parents, who in fact usrp the right to be the primary recipients of culture-based texts for children, have the authority to include their children in the broader culture or exclude them from it (Ostrouch-Kamińska 2011). On the other hand, the technology of modern democratic information society evokes social change owing to such phenomena as the inclusive and emancipatory potential of the so-called 'touch revolution'. Children's access to new technologies (and the children function in this environment much better than adults) as well as the contents they may bring is unavoidable, and often formally releases the children from the authority of their "all-knowing" parents (Bougsiaa et al. 2015). Therefore, social and political problems appear to be a challenge for all ideological practices and require further research.

The results of the presented limited research should be considered as an introduction to the assessment of the potential of picturebook apps as a useful tool for parents' activities aimed at their children's social education and personal development. It is obvious, however, that the discussed type of medial product is still at the very beginning of its history and will surely undergo many substantial changes and improvements in the future. Therefore it seems advisable that both premature enthusiasm and scepticism towards picturebook apps be suspended for several years to come.

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