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Children with autism and picture books: extending the reading experiences of autistic learners of primary age

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Abstract

Autistic learners master visual and spatial abilities; they use visual language to organise, understand and give meaning to the world. Although they might struggle with verbal skills, they have an associative way of thinking. Taking into consideration the characteristics of seven autistic pupils, the aim of this paper was to identify the potential of picture books in relation to autistic readers in order to explain why picture books can be supportive tools for improving verbal and social communication skills. The findings, based on a qualitative case study and a reader response framework, show that picture books help children with autism develop social and communication skills as well as foster imagination. Their written outcomes clearly showed children's need to tell stories.

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Introduction

This research takes into consideration the specific characteristics of children with autism, in particular their reliance on images, like

pictograms, to organise, understand and give meaning to the world (Frith, [2004](#); Rivière, [2002](#); Sigman and Cappas, [2002](#)). Grandin ([2006](#), p. 23) highlights that autistic learners master visual and spatial abilities, although they may struggle with verbal skills. Verbal information can seem abstract to them; however, pictures are concrete, and children with autism focus on the details. For this reason, the use of visual support is one of the most basic strategies in the process of teaching and learning with children (Hernández et al., [2007](#), p. 19). The study conducted by Whalon and Hart ([2011](#)) showed that students with autism find it difficult to interpret texts and that they tend to do so in a literal sense. Grandin ([2006](#), p. 31) draws attention to the associative, rather than logical, nature of the autistic child's way of thinking. In this regard, Rivière ([2002](#)) identifies three educational needs of children with autism: oral language development, imaginative and social skills. We have focused on these aspects since they are closely connected to our area of interest.

Autistic learners and picture books

The purpose of this study is to identify the potential of picture books in relation to autistic readers in order to explain why picture books can help them develop their sociability, their verbal communication and their imagination. According to Tabernero ([2009](#), p. 37), "The picturebook's place is in contemplation, in the education of the senses, in the approach to the object itself, in the construction of an intimate and private space, outside of the imposed thinking". Durán ([2005](#)) highlights that "the great virtue of the visual reading that illustrated books offer us is that they let us acquire some abilities, experiences and emotions which are bases to our cultural and social development" (253). The procedure of making the picture book as explained by B. ([1976](#)), Nikolajeva and Scott ([2001](#)), Arizpe and Styles ([2004](#)), Van der Linden ([2006](#), [2013](#)), Durán ([2010](#), [2009](#)) and Salisbury and Styles ([2012](#)) is related to a holistic conception of the mixture of language, image, verbal text and physical support, which in this context has extra importance as one can read in experts on autistic children, such as Rivière ([2002](#)). Autistic children's limitations regarding verbal language (Hernández et al., [2007](#)) could be diminished by the use of stories based on the already mentioned mixture of semantic relays. The picture book presents a structured world through the combination of visual and verbal language and book materiality. Picture books can encourage children with autism to communicate, interact and express themselves.

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In order to verify this premise, analysis of the young readers' responses is required.

Thus, the aim of this research was to find out if the narrative picture book as a literary genre can help children with autism develop communication skills, social interaction and imagination. The studies on narrative picture book emphasise that this genre should be defined as a discourse that consists of three interacting elements: word, image and support. Van der Linden (2013, p. 7) insists on the relevance of the material element in the definition of genre.

For this research, we selected two works by Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963) and *Little Bear* (Minarik and Sendak, 1957), as a writer and illustrator in one case and illustrator in the other. Respected studies on picture books refer to Sendak as a master of narrative picture book (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001; Salisbury and Styles, 2012; Vander Linden, 2013). He could be regarded as one who sets the standards of the genre. In an interview by Lorraine (2012),¹ Sendak spoke about his own conception of childhood as a place full of contradictions: "Children are way more universal in their pleasures and they can tolerate ambiguities, peculiarities and illogical things. It goes to their unconscious and they face it the best they can". Sendak was not referring to autistic children, of course, but these words can be easily applied to the context of this research. He creates an oneiric world and shows the dark side of childhood: craving for freedom, violence and sense of disobedience, through the imagery which shows in details a universe. This aspect of Sendak's work may be beneficial to autistic learners who show a tendency to focus on small details. Sendak applies visual thinking in all his creations; he calls himself 'interpretative illustrator'.

Based on these considerations, the choice of works can be explained by various reasons. On the one hand, they introduce Max, the main character of *Where the Wild Things Are*, a child character who reflects the expression of contradictory feelings in a mother-son relationship. Kümmerling-Meibauer (2012) argues that empathy can be more likely to develop through the character who makes the reader more comfortable to be around, the one to whom the reader could relate. Such empathic projection can be reinforced by the metaphorical construction to which Sendak is famously prone.

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In these two works, an important role is played by the metaphor in concrete details to get to the abstract (Taberbero, [2014](#); Taberbero and Calvo, [2016](#)). Its ability to create senses is based on associations, not on logical development. This is why Sendak's works can be easily adapted to the context of the research. According to Grandin ([2006](#)), the thinking model of children with autism advances from 'concrete' to 'general' using associative process.

Where the Wild Things Are tells the story of Max, a child who is punished for bad behaviour and is sent to bed without dinner. He sets out on a journey to the country where the wild things live and there becomes their king. This work may be seen to be about mother-son relationship even though the mother doesn't appear in any image; she is only mentioned in the text. Max rebels against his mother; he wants to "eat her up". But once the 'monster-feast' is over, he wants to go back to the place where he is loved more than anything. Sendak creates two food-related metaphors: "I will eat you up" (child's need to devour) and 'hot soup' (mother feeds the child) that symbolise the biggest kind of love ever to exist, unconditional love. In addition, the characters' eyes always look at the reader; they constantly call for reader's attention and invite him/her to enter the physical space of the book. According to the Theory of Mind (Hernández et al., [2007](#), p. 47), eye contact is very important for children with autism.

Little Bear, written by Minarik and illustrated by Sendak, is made of four independent stories about a little bear and the world around him: family, friends and everything that happens between them. The stories are short and simple and full of dialogue, and the illustrations convey a delicate atmosphere which is close to narrative realism; a family of bears is behaving like a human family. Sendak uses white background separate images of mother and son as a symbol of the maximum protection; his use of frames creates a feeling of closed, protected space. In this book, the metaphoric sense of food, 'birthday soup' or 'the dress' is activated by images and details like in the associative process.

Research context and methodology

This case study has been carried out in a primary school in Zaragoza (Spain) during the academic year 2016/2017, with a group of seven students aged 7 to 11 and two teachers who specialise in special education. Every student has individual and personal characteristics;

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however, all of them share some difficulties with social and emotional interaction, as well as using a mainly visual learning style. At the time the study was initiated, the students already had literacy skills and read books with pictograms to develop their reading comprehension skills. There was not a culture of picture book reading before. 'Efferent reading' (reading to extract information) (Rosenblatt, [2002](#)) was preferred, whereas 'aesthetic reading' that implies a reader's emotional response was not usually practised with this kind of book. For this reason, we wanted to focus on the potential of picture books when shared with autistic learners.

Our methodological approach was a qualitative ethnographic paradigm. We have used various qualitative strategies for data collection: teachers' observation diaries, semi-structured interviews with the collaborating teachers, transcriptions of oral conversations from the reading sessions and writing produced by the children. The simplified codes used in the sessions' transcriptions are as follows:

Names of the students: A1, A2

Use of capital letters to emphasise words: MOTHER BEAR

Non-verbal facts: (*looking at the cover*) comments on contextual events, proxemic, gestural and postural behaviours.

For the analysis and interpretation of the data, we have followed Cambra's ethnographic model (Cambra, [2003](#)) and the framework of reader response (Arizpe, [2006](#), [2013](#); Arizpe et al., [2015](#); Rosenblatt, [2002](#); Sipe, [2000](#), [2008](#)).

Reading approach

We employed the *Tell me* reading approach by Chambers ([2007](#)) with the students, as it is intended for beginner readers. The following stages were followed:

1st stage: Teachers *reading aloud* and children's active listening. This reading method is believed to bring the students closer to the reading of the works. In this way, the teachers gave voice to the text, and the children, through "reading by looking" (Tabernero, [2009](#)), followed the reading with the visual support of the illustrations.

2nd stage: Talking about what has been read, listening to the reader's personal experience. This stage corresponds to the *literary discussion* generated from the four

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basic questions structure designed by Chambers: what did you like about the book? What didn't you like? Did you find anything strange, new? And did it remind you of anything? We wanted the children to give free and spontaneous answers, refraining from forcing them to answer and respecting those students who kept silent. We bore in mind that they were children with difficulties in establishing verbal communication, interacting with each other and participating in group activities. The goal was to create a relaxed and supportive atmosphere in the sense of 'mediated reading' suggested by Riquelme and Munita (2011).

Analysis and findings

Children's responses and productions and the teacher's beliefs

We have selected some significant fragments of the conversations between the children and the teachers, the texts produced after the reading and teachers' comments.

Where the Wild Things Are was read in three sessions because the children asked for this reading several times with sentences such as "I want *Where the wild things are!*" The teacher created a semicircle in the meeting space and read the text a loud while showing the images to the children. Later on, the teacher asked each child what they had liked the most about it. In this context, taking into account that it was the first session for this activity, the teacher decided to ask the questions individually, because the students were not used to answering group questions (Hernández et al., 2007). The answers given by the children were the following:



A1:

Max

A2:

The soup

A3:

I liked where the wild things are

A4:

Their terrible claws roared

A5:

Hot hot

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Teacher 1:

What is hot?

A5:

Good things to eat

Teacher 1:

Did you like anything else?

A5:

I will eat you up

Teacher 1:

Anything else?

A5:

Terrible roars gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws and until Max said NOW STOP please don't go we will eat you up we love you so Max said NO good things to eat and this is all

As shown, readers mentioned details, such as 'the soup', 'the wild things', "good things to eat", 'hot', "I will eat you up" and one of them (A5) repeated his favourite sentences from the reading aloud of the text: 'terrible roars', 'terrible teeth', 'terrible eyes', 'terrible claws', that is, in his transaction (Rosenblatt, [2002](#)) with the text, he internalised the sonorous interplay in which the illustrations play an essential role experience of the book's reception.

After the conversation, the teacher gave a blank piece of paper to the students, so the students who wanted to express themselves could do it through drawing or writing. One of the children (A1) responded with this production shown in Figure [1](#):

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Figure 1

[Open in figure viewer](#) | [PowerPoint](#)

A student's production and drawing. Translation: I like Where the wild things are. I like their terrible roars gnashed and their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws. THE END

This student (Figure 1: A1) first created the picture in which we can see the wild things and Max in his boat and then drew some lines so the teacher could write what he wanted to dictate to her. We observe how the child, from orality, appropriated the sonorous interplay and the repetition of words to incorporate them in his oral discourse in order to express his fondness for the book.

We can read another response (A4) to this picture book in the following text shown in Figure 2:

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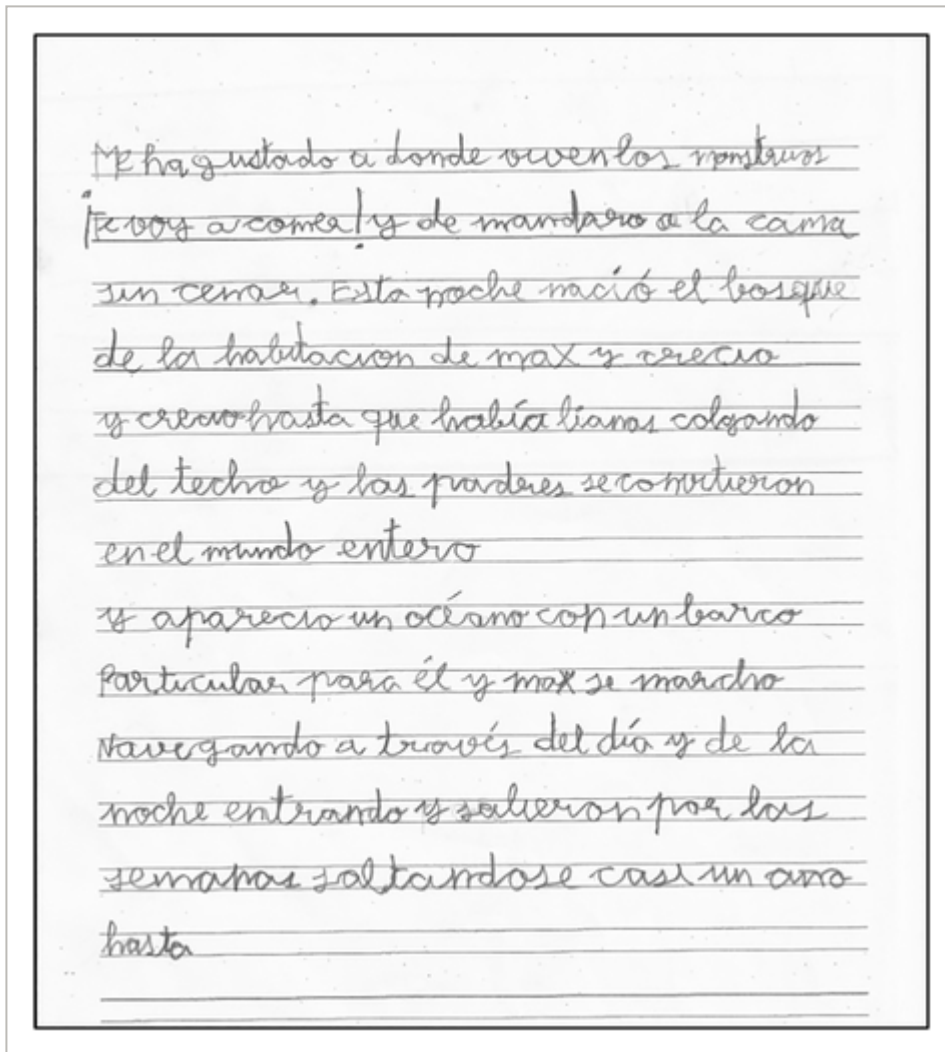


Figure 2

[Open in figure viewer](#) | [PowerPoint](#)

A student's production. Translation: I like Where the wild things are. I will eat you up!. and he was sent to bed without eating anything. That very night in Max's room a forest grew and grew and grew until his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around. And an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for him and Max sailed off through night and day and in and out of weeks and almost over a year to

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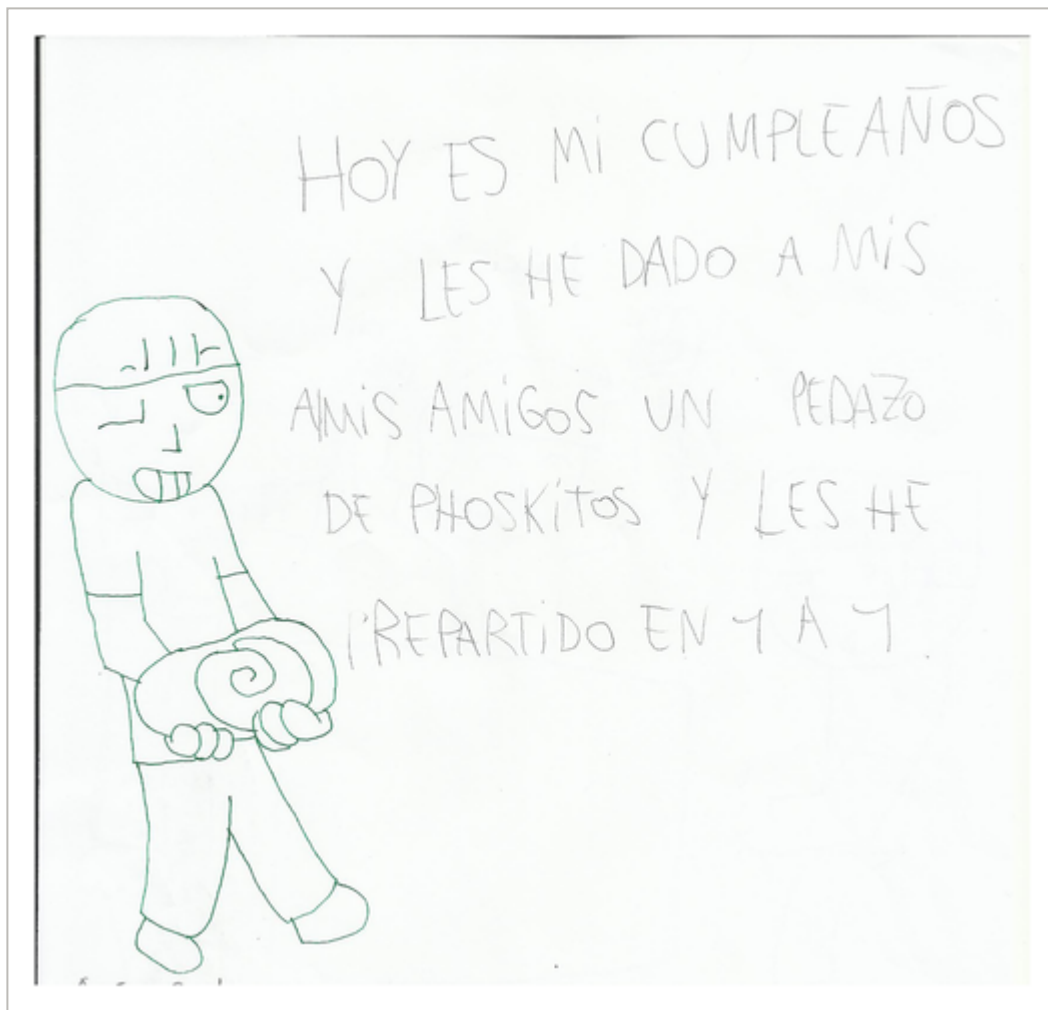


Figure 3

[Open in figure viewer](#) | [PowerPoint](#)

A student's production and drawing. Translation: Today is my birthday and I gave my friends a piece of 'phoskitos' and I divided it into 1 to 1 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Taking into consideration communication and social components, teachers pointed out the fact that this student had great difficulty with oral and written communication, and they appreciated the child's initiative, spontaneity and desire to get closer to the book, touch it, look at it, observe it and finally copy some sentences.

In relation to the responses obtained from *Little Bear*, the first observations are the children's physical reactions of movement towards the book: "I want the story!", "I like the little bear", taking the book, opening it and looking carefully at the illustrations. There were six reading sessions for this work, since some of the stories from *Little Bear* were read more than once because of the interest shown by the group, as with "What will little bear wear?" and 'Birthday soup'. For example,

during the reading of "What will little bear wear?", one of the students repeated constantly "little bear is mine". After the reading, these were some of the conversations held by the teachers with each child:



Teacher 1:

What did you like?

A1:

Little bear little bear is cold he is a fur coat

Teacher 1:

Whose is the fur coat?

A1:

Little bear's

Teacher 1:

Was there something you didn't like?

A1:

Yes I liked it ((*smiling enthusiastically*))



Teacher 1:

What did you like the most?

A2:

Everything

Teacher 1:

The thing you liked the most?

A2:

Said mother bear said little bear that here are little bear's pants. How were them? Safe



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Teacher 1:

What did you like the most?

A3:

The little baby bear



Teacher 1:

What did you like the most?

A4:

LITTLE BEAR ((*pointing to the picture*))



Teacher 2:

What did you like the most?

A5:

I like I am cold I like eating I like cold hat

Teacher 2:

Was there something you didn't like?

A5:

NO

Teacher 2:

Which picture do you like?

A5:

I like painting I like mother bear a coat a hat and mum
bear I like picking up a ball



Teacher 1:

What did you like the most?

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A6:

That's great! That's great!! I liked the picture he puts on the pants first one leg then the other and the white t-shirt

According to these answers, children notice specific details of the illustrations, such as 'fur coat', 'pants', 'hat' and 'ball'. All of them focus on the character 'little bear'; one of them (A4) approaches the book and points at it with his finger, and the rest of the children eagerly say that little bear is what they liked most. The children connect with the character and can develop empathy through metaphoric construction. The way Sendak creates these visual metaphors together with the repetitive and simple language of the text contribute to the fact that the children (A5 y A6) paused to express his fondness for the pictures and observed the pictures' little details such as "picking up a ball" and the colour of the clothes, 'white t-shirt' and even inferred how little bear gets dressed although this situation is not described in the text.

The children expressed the following statements about 'Birthday soup':



Teacher 1:

What did you like the most?

A7:

When he hugged his mother (*(he refers to the last illustration)*) and when little bear prepared the soup because he was very selfless

Teacher 1:

What was selfless?

A7:

That little bear cooks because if he didn't know how to do it he could have burnt.

Teacher 1:

Was there something you didn't like?

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A7:

Well when his mother had gone



Teacher 1:

What did you like?

A2:

Eating cake.

Teacher 1:

Was there something you didn't like?

A2:

Duck cat



Teacher 1:

What did you like?

A5:

I love the cake the tale of little bear

Teacher 1:

What is the title?

A5:

Birthday soup I liked the whole story

Teacher 1:

Was there something you found strange?

A5:

The soup



Teacher 1:

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What did you like?

A1:

Little bear is going to prepare a bowl soup to eat

Teacher 1:

Anything else?

A1:

One two three ta-dah BIRTHDAY CAKE ready

Teacher 1:

Anything else?

A1:

Preparing the black pan to cook something

Teacher 1:

Was there something you didn't like?

A1:

Waiting for mother bear but mother bear is here already because the end it has finished

Teacher 1:

Did it remind you of anything?

A1:

Mother bear ((*with an irritated tone*))

White backgrounds of the pages help isolate the details, making it possible for children to notice and mention: 'duck', 'cat', 'a black pan' and 'bowl', these subtle little details. Hence, the references they make to the food, the mother, the cake and the soup as a strange element in a birthday party and to 'selfless' because, as one student says (A7): "That little bear cooks because if he didn't know how to do it he could have burnt", in this phrase, we can infer student's empathic projection towards the character. This student did not like the fact that the mother was gone. In the last two pages of the tale, the story ends in kind and loving circumstances, as expressed by this student (A1): "but mother bear is here already because the end it has finished".

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In the student's (Figure 3; A5) production, we can observe how reading helps foster his imagination, develop his social skills and how it gradually spreads to writing and drawing to help him tell his own story. When the child finished his drawing, the teacher asked him who the character was and he answered it was him (Figure 3). When asked how he felt, the student replied he was pleased.

In order to understand how picture books could encourage children with autism to communicate and foster their imagination and social development, the data provided by the teachers' diaries and the interviews were very relevant. In relation to *Where the Wild Things Are*, the abundance of oral productions and the motivation for voluntary writing were quite remarkable. This process surprised the teachers because when they give the students a written task, the students usually need oral support. Apart from that, the teachers pointed out the students' physical approach to the book, the fact that they took it, touched it, looked at it and copied the text (Figure 2).

One of the teachers related a child's experience with *Little Bear*:

“One afternoon one of the children was quite nervous, so I showed him *Little Bear* and asked him if he wanted to read it. The child voluntarily chose 'Birthday soup', he started to read the tale out loud very attentively and at the same moment I noticed how he was calming down. I must emphasise the difficulty the text presented for the child in relation to his reading acquisition process. I observed a great effort and interest to read the story to the end.”

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In this case, the child entered the book space to share it with an adult. Now, it is he who reads to his teacher and reading makes him feel calm. Page frames, white backgrounds and calm, peaceful structure of the book help children focus.

The teachers valued this reading experience in a very positive and gratifying way:

“I think everyone has enjoyed the readings. Some of them repeated sequences such as: 'their terrible roars' 'their terrible

repeated sequences such as: 'then terrible fears', 'then terrible claws', 'my little bear is mine'. Others have shown great pleasure in drawing their favourite illustrations and have written voluntarily. They paid great attention during the reading, they looked at the book's pictures with great interest and their faces showed expectation and excitement."

”

Conclusion

As Rivière (2002) argues, autistic children present particular difficulties with verbal communication, social and imaginative development. In this paper, we wanted to find out if the picture book narrative as a literary genre could help autistic learners to develop communication, social interaction and imagination. In order to verify this premise, we have analysed young readers' response, productions and the teacher's beliefs regarding two of Maurice Sendak's works. We chose this author for his conception of childhood and for his use of metaphors for specific details as a central concept of his narrative universe. All of these aspects are closely related to children with autism condition (Grandin, 2006).

According to the children's verbal responses and written outcomes that emerged naturally after reading, children have retained the narrative structure of the discourse as it is shown in Figures 1 and 2, and they have developed their verbal language not only through their need to communicate (Hernández et al., 2007) but also by expressing their experience of reading through writing.

Bonnafé (2008, p. 47) points out that “the language of the story opens the door of the fiction”; in this sense, the teacher's diaries and the interviews provided us with contextualised facts in which the children take the readings out of the classroom and they become the trigger for social relationships with other people. This was done by, for example, mentioning Max, the main character of *Where the Wild Things Are*, in the playground and wanting to tell the story to their classmates; and in the extracurricular activities, due to the children's insistence on talking about the book, they created Max's costume and pretended they were monsters; they developed a symbolic game based on the literary work. This is the example of how reading can expand and become part of

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children's lives, and their written outcomes also show children's need to tell stories.

Following the observed data, there are notable examples of development of ability to empathise through the characters (Nikolajeva, [2012](#)). For instance, one reader (A1) identified with the main character of the story because of the tenderness represented in the illustrations of *Little Bear*.

The study highlights the importance of the physical book (Bader, [1976](#); Van der Linden, [2013](#)); autistic children approached the physical book with a desire to manipulate it, look at it and, in some cases, to read it with an adult, taking the example of the *Little Bear's* experience, narrated by a teacher. This fact must be pointed out because autistic students “have a lack of social or emotional reciprocity and an absence of the natural trend of sharing with other people objects, hobbies and interests” (Hernández et al., [2007](#), p. 128). Thus, the book as an object encourages the relation between the child reader and the adult reader as a transitional object (Winnicott, [2005](#)). As Bonnafé ([2008](#), p. 23) expresses: “The book only has an effect if it is the object of shared affection”.

Finally, we argue that a picture book, by its own nature (text, image and format), has proved to be an appropriate genre to engage autistic children and to develop their oral and written abilities, emotions and empathy which form the basis for our social development.

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