For a Pedagogy of Reading in the Digital/ Postmodern Age. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* – Invitation to a "Different" Reading

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1. Values of postmodern society – Reading scale of reality/ education

Contemporary society is undoubtedly under the postmodernism footprint. How do the values of postmodern society affect people's lifestyle and mainly which is the impact of these values on young people? How about on education? What should teachers do to meet the challenges of a postmodern education? Here are questions to which the possible answers are challenges that specialists in various fields are trying to answer, joining their efforts of interpretation with the hope that an interdisciplinary perspective (philosophical – social-pedagogical) may provide a more complete explanation for the impact of postmodern values on education .

A foray into the specialty literature leads us to conclude that the term postmodern, "equivocal and contradictory by its etymological nature" (Ulrich 2007: 15), designates a constantly changing, diverse, kaleidoscopic reality. Not few voices (Lipovetski, Ritzer, Huntington, Aronowitz, Giroux etc.) describe the current society as paradoxical, contradictory or even alienated by the values it promotes, opposing values that co-exist (in the same space and time).

For example, M. Maliţa (2001) describes seven virtues and seven deadly sins of postmodernism, which can be seen as two sides of the same coin. The seven virtues analysed by the mentioned author are: tearing down walls, fall of dogmas, death of grand theories, diversity, individual, the aesthetic dimension, liberation of time and space. And the reverse is the "seven sins": the dethronement of reason, abolition of truth, disappearance of universality, challenging reality, relativism, dizziness in communication, denigration of civilization. In other words, values such as the concrete individual with its subjectivity, hedonism, diversity, creativity are more and more visible, along with values such as reflection, evaluation, efficiency, high quality, standardization.

These values contaminate all areas of the social and individual life, and the individual is in the dilemmatic position of finding a balance between "standardization and customization" (Neculau 2003) or between globalization and localization.

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Nowadays society is described as "globalized" and globalization, as stated Ritzer, one of the analysts of this phenomenon, is neither simple nor without some ambiguity and represents "the world distribution of practices, expanding relations beyond the continental limits, organization of social life on a global scale and enhancing a common global consciousness" (Ritzer 2010: 19). Even if economics was the one which made globalization a reality, through the emergence of global markets and international businesses, the impact of globalization is felt from blurring borders, become now symbolic ones, to the globalization of communication, culture and education. Music, religion, technology, sports, literature are good examples for this. How do the values of a postmodern globalized society affect lifestyle and education?

The philosophers and sociologists consider that the postmodern man has adapted, while developing a specific culture, becoming a "homo consumericus".

Postmodern man's happiness is, as G. Lipovestki argues in his essay on the hyper-consumerism society, *homo consumericus'* happiness "a sort of turbo-shifted consumer, mobile and flexible, largely emancipated from class prejudices of the ancient cultures, unpredictable as concerning his tastes and shopping" (Lipovetski 2007: 7).

The paradox lies in the fact that this consumer is much more informed, reflective and "aesthetic" (by aesthetic meaning "based on emotionality, guided by the pleasure principle. I buy it because I like it, not because I need it"), free to choose from a variety of products, but, at the same time, depending on the material products that make him happy.

Consumption is expanding in a subtle way, gradually and safely even within the spiritual life, thus being explained the whole range of "recipes of happiness" (books, CDs, DVDs on relaxation techniques, counselling, religious services, etc.) sold in hypermarkets. There is a hyper-materialism in contemporary human happiness as "the consumerist civilization is defined by the central place occupied by the pursuit of welfare and a better life for himself and his kin" (*ibidem*: 9).

The characteristics of the postmodern culture are also analysed from a sociological perspective by David Lyon who notes that "postmodernism is rightly associated with a society where consumer's lifestyle of and mass consumption dominate the conscious life of its members" (Lyon 1998: 97).

The implications of this society on education constitute a giant challenge for everyone involved in the training and educating the citizens of this world.

More and more questions arise about what school, teachers, parents should do to help young people to adapt to the postmodern demands.

Or in other words, how can education for children in the postmodern era be achieved? In order to provide an appropriate answer we need, however, to find out how students in today's society are, what their specificity is. Nowadays generation is characterized by social and human sciences specialists as the "Homo zappiens" generation which grew up using modern technology (mobile phone, computer, iPod, MP3 player) since early childhood. This has induced major changes in playing, networking and learning, sometimes creating huge discrepancies between generations, especially between parents and children, children and teachers. This is because "Homo zappiens is digital and school is analogous" (Veen, Vrakking 2011: 11). They act in a global cyber-based multimedia culture (*ibidem*: 33).

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Technology has obviously changed a lot young people's behaviour, conceptions about work, and learning in particular. School is seen rather as a place of socialization, of face-to-face relationships, not necessarily as a place of "enrichment of knowledge". These conceptions "collide" with parents' and teachers' conceptions, who sometimes still share the belief that thorough hard work, training skills based on repetitive exercises under the guidance of an authorized person, reading and reproduction of points of view are the source of success in learning.

Therefore, the psychological and pedagogical portrait of the postmodern student is different: the student is the product of the postmodern globalized, super-tech society, based on consumption, power of image, creativity and adaptation, focusing on effectiveness/ utility and pleasure.

What can school do? Here is what teachers answer (Păun 2002, Ulrich 2007): post-modernization of school. That is, the whole teaching approach should be centred on the student "as a person with his specific and differentiating features which must be capitalized at the maximum" (Păun 2002: 20). This solution suggested by the cited author would make school more attractive to students, closer to the reality they live in concretely, a reality where they would find (again) meaning for their daily existence. Hence, the values of postmodern society provide benchmarks for the design of teaching and educational activities closer to the psychological profile of students. "Brought" in school, the postmodern values are subject to critical reflection aimed at developing students' capacity of responsible option, critical thinking and creative adaptation.

2. The implications of postmodern values on children's reading

It is a well-known fact that today, in the digital era, reading, in its classical form, has changed. The book is in competition with the tablet, the videos and / or images that "speak" for themselves.

Current society values, promoted by the media, leave their mark on children's literature. Maybe this can explain the success of Jeff Kinney's book, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, considered the no. 1 best seller in the "New York Times" List.

The fact that it is a commercial novel (which bears the imprint of consumerism) is stressed by the appreciation the novel enjoys in the media:

– "Make way, Harry Potter! This is a new series dominating the bestsellers for children and has nothing to do with inventions" (Andrea Yeats on the National Public Radio);

– "A wonderful book for all those reluctant to reading and for those looking for a funny book" ("School Library Journal");

– "One of the most successful series ever published for children" ("Washington Post").

Diary of a Wimpy Kid – which has already reached the tenth volume – demonstrates the speed (the first volume was published in 2007) at which a children's book which knows through the way of addressing the contemporary world how to attract readers of all ages may become a bestseller. Why is it so demanded? Because it is a book which is "amusing", "generous" – it gives the child – and adolescent-reader an accurate image of daily experiences and the adult-reader

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(teacher, parent and grandparent) a foray into the world of childhood and the possibility of knowing nowadays children's concerns.

Author Jeff Kinney deals, bravely, with a literary genre less loved by children – the diary – reinventing it, using the story-telling in the first person, a language specific to preadolescence and adolescence, easily passing from one plan of narrative to another, covering the events related by suggestive images – thereby creating a comics novel. But with this approach – combining pictures with text – the diary-novel/ novel-diary becomes an interesting and exciting reading, which attracts the child-reader who empathizes with Greg.

The volumes of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* offer one side (an ideal one) of the postmodern society: the image of the happy child (having one harmonious family, going to school, having friends and age-specific activities, not caring about material issues), anchored in the values of the society he lives in. Greg can be any child, in any country, with dreams and fears specific to his age. We must note that the novel character is a "*authentic*" child within the postmodern meaning, that is, a child with such concrete problems – problems with teachers, quarrels with brothers, visiting cousins, with the joys and sorrows of the age – that almost every child can relate to or would like to find himself in.

Radiographs of the contemporary world, the ten volumes published so far, follow, step by step, the adventures of the hero-narrator, Greg. The titles are suggestive for each volume: *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid 2: Rodrick Rules*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid 3: The Last Straw*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid 4: Dog Days*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid 5: The Ugly Truth*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid 6: Cabin Fever*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid 7: The Third Wheel*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid 8: Hard Luck*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid 9: The Long Haul*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid 10: Old School*. We find, reading the journal, characteristics of the postmodern world (according to Lyon 1998) and to a *homo consumericus* (Lipovestki 2007) in formation: the hero-narrator Greg Heffley is addicted to material and / or spiritual goods that make him happy.

Diary of a Wimpy Kid 1 – Diary of Greg Heffley is an exposure of the idea of diary, in Greg's vision:

> First, let us be clear. This is a DIARY, not a diary. [...] The only reason I agreed to do all this is because I'll realize later, when I'm rich and famous, that I have something better to do than to answer stupid questions all day long. So this book will be useful to me (p. 1–2).

He relates the events that occurred, during a school year (September to June), conflicts with teachers, peers and parents, jokes not understood by adults and "rewarded" with penalties specific to hisage and the digital society (forbidding him to watch TV, to play video games, etc.).

Diary of a Wimpy Kid 2: Rodrick Rules shows what happens from September to December – although, by the title, the main character is Rodrick, Greg's older brother, already in high school, most of the events narrated put Greg in the spotlight – at school, with his friend Rowley, in the family.

Diary of a Wimpy Kid 3: The Last Straw continues the reports of the second year of the diary, from January to June, when, to please his father, Greg must do

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sports, but succeeds each time to skip them. Savoury pages are dedicated to telling the thrills of first love.

Diary of a Wimpy Kid 4: Dog Days is dedicated to the adventures from the summer holiday. For Greg, the ideal holiday is "in front of a TV, with video games, with the blinds drawn and the lights off". This time, it is the mother who changes Greg's plans, suggesting numerous family trips. Also, she is one who accepts that Greg goes on holiday with his friend Rowley's family.

The other volumes (5–10) continue the humorous stories of Greg, the hero-narrator, now a teenager, when facing age-specific problems and trying to approach them sometimes with humour, sometimes with drama.

A characteristic of postmodern culture is offering a variety of "recipes of happiness" and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* is no exception – the novel's success entails publication of a book (the "template" of a journal) to be written by the reader: *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Do-It-Yourself* Book and conducting screenings after the first volumes.

3. Research on the impact of postmodern values on the 4th grade (primary school) students' reading

The research objective: identifying the values underlying the choice of readings for children.

The study was conducted on a sample of 100 students from the 4th grade (56 girls and 44 boys), who received a questionnaire regarding attitudes towards reading and to four teachers. Please note that the four teachers had reading as an optional subject – "The Book Club".

Methodology: questionnaire, interview and case study.

The questionnaire was designed for students in the 4th grade, with mixed questions containing items concerning attitude to reading, students preferred types of reading.

The interview was conducted with the teachers of the fourth grade that had reading as optional course.

Two case studies were conducted on two students in the 4th grade, a boy and a girl, who had read all the volumes of the novel, who are the same age and come from families with similar structure (both students have one younger brother, the same age).

Data analysis and interpretation

The quantitative analysis of the questionnaire showed that among the leisure time activities, reading is among the children's preferences, but on second place to tablet/ computer games and at a very small distance to other extracurricular activities (swimming, dancing, drawing, football, etc.), according to the table below:

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Leisure time activities for the 4th grade students	Percentage
Tablet / computer games	48%
Reading	32%
Other activities (sports, drawing, playing in the park)	30%

Tab. 1. Percentage of leisure time activities

The number of students who have read the novel on their own initiative, 30 girls, and 24 boys shows that there is no gender preference for this novel.

The reason they read the novel, for a percentage of 57% students was – curiosity and one of its most appreciated qualities is to be "funny" for a percentage of 62%, "easy to read" and many lessons learned. The impact of the novel at a quantitative level is reflected in the percentage of 25% children who read it and they would also strongly recommend the novel to other children.

Processing of data from the interviews with their teachers highlighted the main reasons that underlie the basis of reading the novel: because it is "easy to read" or it is "fast to read" and "funny".

Another reason for reading the novel on their own initiative is that the novel has enjoyed a very good marketing campaign, which aroused children's curiosity.

Also, another reason encountered at those who attended the *reading club* is that they could discuss certain events or even add to the book or colour the characters drawn.



Fig. no. 1. A colour page of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*

Summarizing the data collected, it appears that the novel has enjoyed great attention among students because it promotes postmodern values and it is "different": *it is funny and accessible* (there is the hedonist spirit of our age!), *it is authentic* (children find themselves in the novel, which leaves the impression that "is written for me!", hence the individualism specific to postmodernism), *it calls for reflection* (children can write, draw or make your own journal!), *it is fashionable* (it

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appeared in TV commercials), *it is "globalized"* (readers are girls and boys from different cultures, of different ages.)

From the interview with the teachers also emerged the idea that a pedagogical processing of the novel has formative effects, visible in the motivation for reading and writing.

The analysis of the case studies highlights some of the conclusions outlined above by the interpreted data.

The case study on a student X.Y., in the 4th grade, male, who comes from a family of four (mother, father and a younger brother), attending a school in the urban area, who read all 9 volumes of the novel during a year, revealed that the student has read the novel on its own initiative, prompted by classmates and by watching the ad.

The impact of the novel was so strong that after the first volume, X.Y. tried to keep a journal, on Greg's model. (We quote below, for example, a page for which for the parents' and the child's permission has been obtained).

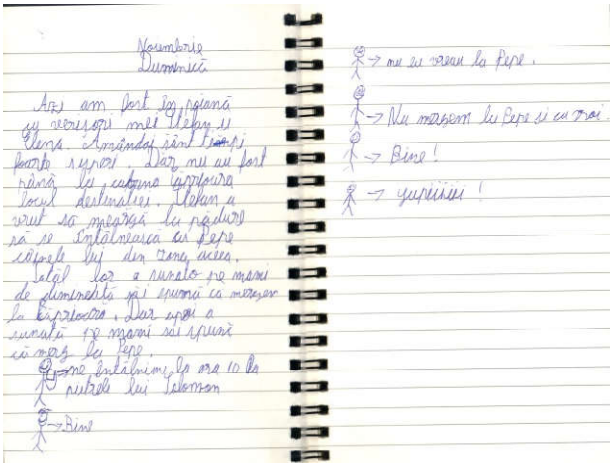


Fig. no. 2. X.Y. Diary

The novel was liked due to the style used by the author, a funny one, and to the adventures to which each child could relate (significant were the "negotiations" between brothers). He used to read the funny stories to his younger brother (who could not read), but watched the pictures. He would tell the story, or some events to his parents, especially to his mother.

A case study on Y.Z., in the fourth grade, female, from an urban school, highlighted a similar strong impact on the motivation aroused by the novel to read and write. Just like the subject of the aforementioned case, Y.Z. made her own diary (influenced by *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, adopting the same manner of recording funny stories, everyday events, accompanied by drawings); she read on her own initiative

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other novels, such as "The Wonderful World of Tom Gates", being a very active member of the book club. Although we expected male subjects to empathize more easily with the character, this also happens, as resulting from the Y.Z. case, for female subjects.

Both case studies highlight the powerful impact of a novel that manages to mobilize developing reading and writing skills in an attractive manner, accessible to children. Children find in fact a universal child, of our time, which they love and who becomes a promoter of certain values, especially if these are pedagogically processed.

4. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates, despite the inherent limitations of an empirical, ascertaining research, that the values underlying the choice of readings for children are the significant values for the world the children live in, that they are trying to understand and to which they want to adapt as efficiently as possible.

Both from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the research results, we can draw a valuable theoretical and practical conclusion: stimulation of the interest in reading can be achieved by incorporating postmodern values in the literary texts. Involving students in an interactive manner in reading, using authentic texts, using humour are ingredients capable of intrinsically motivating for reading pieces of literature.

Furthermore, the pedagogical processing, through the curriculum at the school decision, where the student-teacher dialogue becomes an exchange of views or it is the beginning of debates in which teachers and students join in the "trial" of the characters is another way to increase interest in reading even in a society where books seem to lose ground.

The teachers' competence to address reading "differently", in a postmodern way, is a solution to form positive attitudes towards the written text.

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Abstract

The article is focused on the study of postmodern values wich are involved in the choice of readings for children, specially *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. Postmodern society can be defined by a series of characteristics such as globalization, the great dynamics of social life, consumerism, the multitude of values etc, which give a new perspective on life and education. It is a well-known fact that today, in the digital era, reading, in its classical form, has changed. The book is in competition with the tablet, the videos and/ or images that "speak" for themselves.

The volumes of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* offer reading keys for deciphering the values of postmodern society: Greg is the image of the universal child that transcends cultural spaces. Greg can be any child, in any country, with dreams and fears specific to his age. We must note that the novel character is a "*authentic*" child within the postmodern meaning, that is, a child with such concrete problems – problems with teachers, quarrels with brothers, visiting cousins, with the joys and sorrows of the age – that almost every child relate to.

The conclusion of this study is that stimulation of the interest in reading can be achieved by incorporating postmodern values in the literary texts. Involving students in an interactive manner in reading, using authentic texts, using humour are ingredients capable of intrinsically motivating for reading pieces of literature. The teachers' competence to address reading "differently", in a postmodern way, is a solution to form positive attitudes towards the written text.

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