

The Development of Creative Thinking in the Context of Educational Programs With Stimulus — Focus on Literary Texts, Nursery School Applications

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Abstract: The main goal of education is the cultivation of creative thinking. The way to achieve this is to design educational programs using Literature. A common feature of educational programs and reading roles is creativity. Pursuing the universal participation of students in the programs, we take care of the formation of friendly relations in the school classroom, the appropriate selection and attractive performance of literary texts to ensure the reading right of the students to express themselves freely about the texts. We also formulate practical proposals for the playful nature of the programs.

Based on the teaching principle of declining guidance, students produce narrative texts that we use in various ways in order to further enhance their willingness to participate. Finally, we quote the children's texts, so conclusions emerge about the degree of achievement of the goal of cultivating creative thinking with a focus on literature.

Key words: creative thinking, literature, educational programs

1. Introduction

In the modern age of image and technology, we set as primary goal of the educational process the development of creative thinking of our students and tomorrow's citizens. Vassilis Anagnostopoulos points out about the dominance of the image in our time that we feel it as opium, it has become a source of addiction and its victims are constantly multiplying. As a unique antidote, he proposes reading, the contact with literary works (Anagnostopoulos, 2007).

Facing this enormous challenge of cultivating creative thinking, we design a variety of educational, animating programs in the nursery school that we consider our most valuable allies in our personal struggle to cultivate the imagination of our students. A common element of all our applied programs is the utilization of literature in them. The literary text is in each case placed as a focus, starting point or stimulus for the educational program. The literary model is the strongest stimulus of children's — and not only — imagination. It inspires, takes off, releases forces and abilities (Ilia, 2004). More specifically, our constant orientation in the field of literature is based first of all on its ability not only to transmit knowledge but to achieve this, provoking

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experiences. Narrative data, such as suggestive references etc., cause complex perceptual processes, which offer the reader the feeling that he is personally involved in the world of literary work. The reading role in literary texts could therefore be characterized as highly creative (Iser, 1990). Jean Alter states that the imaginary world has many meanings and that the interest of any classic or modern writer lies precisely in the fact that his work can inspire different interpretations (Alter, 1985). Similarly, Michael Riffaterre believes that the interpretation of any literary text should not seek to dispel the ambiguity that is characteristic of literary writing, as all words are polysemous (Riffaterre, 1985).

Utilizing Literature in Education effortlessly results in the aesthetic pleasure, the emotional charge that we feel as a result of reading creativity. Under this condition, literature functions in the school context as the most important means of education. Let us not forget that since antiquity, literature with the dominant form of tragedy aimed exclusively at educating the citizens (Tompkins, 1988). In the context of educational programs, we take advantage of the inexhaustible nature of Literature, that is, the fact that each individual reading is different, unique, original, unrepeatable and worth expressing precisely because it stems from the particularity, the uniqueness of each reader. Response theorists associate the interpretation of the text with the characteristics of each specific reader (Tziovas, 1987).

2. Side Goals

Apart from the main goal of the development of creative thinking, it is obvious that individual goals are set within the framework of the programs. The linguistic development and especially the cultivation of the narrative ability through the reading of literary works and the creation by the children of original narrative texts are indicatively mentioned here. Reference is also made to the acquaintance with the literary phenomenon; in addition, understanding the connection between oral and written speech, the quality of written speech to represent the spoken word. The goal of promoting contact and communication between all toddlers could be added, thus creating strong friendships between them. As the varied presentation of the daily achievements of the students in the context of the educational programs is ensured, the opening of the school to the wider society is also sought and achieved. This contributes to communication and understanding between different generations and offers all of us optimism and hope.

3. Principles and Practices of Our Teaching Approach

As with all the educational programs that we develop, we aim primarily at the cultivation of creative thinking and expression of all our students, our programs definitely include the production, creation of original narrative texts by the toddlers, either in groups or individually (Huck et al., 1979).

Ensuring the universal participation of our students in these programs, the development of reflection by them and the ability to express-exchange their personal experiences, wishes and expectations regarding the texts, are our priority. Therefore, the basic condition for participation in educational programs is the creation of an excellent relationship and cooperation between teacher and students, as well as the development of strong bonds and collaborations between all classmates. It is obvious that when the child feels that he is in a friendly, supportive environment, he does not hesitate to participate in the educational program. Especially, when the goal of participation is the originality and the expression of the uniqueness of each individual. As students' suspensions dissolve, the results of the learning process improve dramatically.

Another aspect that favors universal participation is the realization by all of us that both teachers and students are in the same position in relation to any text, that of the reader, and we have exactly the same rights in the game of reading. If the teacher does not function as an authority, the ability of his students to express themselves freely and creatively is not limited.

Special mention could be made to the importance of being aware that as we read the text for the first time ourselves, especially to toddlers, what children receive is not just the text but their teacher's personal reading of it. Consequently, it is also an important condition for the success of the programs that the text we present excites us, it fascinates us so much, that we support it by reading it. Thus, we select exclusively remarkable literary works, according to our personal aesthetic criteria.

Another condition for achieving the goal of cultivating the creative thinking of all toddlers through contact with literary texts is to be fully aware, when reading, that our voice is crucial to our students' reactions to the work. For example, with its pauses and fluctuations we help children to get involved in the narrative world. By the way we color it as we read either the interactive parts or the narrative comments, we influence the students-readers in shaping their attitude towards the various literary heroes or in their judgement of the narrator's credibility.

The program gives each student the opportunity to be at the center of the interest of the whole school class, to discover himself, seeking communication with those around him and interacting with them. In other words, the contribution, the role of classmates in these kinds of processes proves to be crucial for the universal successful participation in educational programs. Everyone's participation in the program is an enjoyable experience and a valuable team achievement.

However, as the dominant element of children's nature is the need and willingness to play (Huizinga, 1989) in order to ensure the universal and enthusiastic participation of students, we make sure to give the educational programs a playful dimension which from time to time takes different forms. Christian Poslaniek, seeking to encourage teachers in a variety of different interpretations of the members of a class, suggests the use of various specific animating activities (Poslaniek, 1992).

4. Methodology

The power of the "magic element" is extraordinary. Although we all know that it is not magical, we accept it as such, due to a common contract, our willingness to play. Some related activities that we have implemented with excellent results are:

- Fantasy glasses that children wear to see "inside" the world of history and refer to it.
- The magic ticket to enter the world of history.
- The magic words, uttered by students, offer them the opportunity to enter the world of history.
- The Ocean of Fantasy that we form in the school classroom, where the students take a dip in order to retell the narrative story.
- The magic wand that transforms students into story heroes.

In any case, we use literary texts as models, as a field of inspiration, reference and stimuli. The basis of all animating, playful activities is dramatization. Students are asked to express their identification with the narrative characters included in the texts. Identification with literary figures offers the opportunity to personally experience narrative situations, to react emotionally to them and to express yourself without interruption, referring to the feelings and expectations that literature evokes in you (Booth, 1987).

After the influence of the “magic” element and the contribution of the imagination, the students enter the world of literary history, they are transformed into its heroes and choose either the version of the creative imitation or that of the overthrow of the literary model (Matsagouras, 2001) to express freely their identification with specific narrative characters, to relive the narrative scene that has fascinated them and to shape the development of the action, according to their personal experiences and desires.

The creation by toddlers of their own individual and group original narrative texts arises based on the principle of declining guidance applied to text-centered teaching models (Matsagouras, 2001). In other words, as the students’ answers become more complete and clearer, the relevant questions asked by the teacher are limited. The process by which children’s texts emerge is that of questions and answers. The teacher, who is a very attentive listener, asks questions, usually clarifying, in relation to the previous answers he has received (Pascucci & Rossi, 2002). It goes without saying that the more complete the toddlers’ answers are, the more limited the number of teacher’s questions is. The reading response, the narrative texts of the students in the context of the various educational programs are always recorded in traditional or modern ways (writing on paper, writing on a computer, recording, videotaping, etc.) for various uses. This utilization, e.g., theatrical performance, publication etc., works for students as an additional incentive to express their reading impressions (Ilia & Matsagouras, 2006).

5. Selection of Theatrical Texts

The first contact of children with literature in nursery school is usually made through modern illustrated books. Here we look at some alternatives, as they have proven to be just as effective in achieving our goal. For example, one of our programs was based on Penelope Delta’s book “*Trelantonis*”, as little Antonis is another brilliant literary model. The sympathy and admiration of his three brothers but also the practical recognition of his virtues by the adult members of his family, although they often suffer from his lively character, has as a consequence that the children-readers identify with him.

Sometimes, we choose texts of unquestionable aesthetic quality from Modern Greek or world literature, not necessarily labeled as children’s. Although nowadays the “children’s book” is flourishing and there are many books intended exclusively for children, we do not exclude the older works, which we consider appropriate, even when they have not been used editorially in this direction. We have chosen, for example from the Aeolian Land of Elias Venezis, where a boy narrates his life in the countryside of Asia Minor during the persecutions of 1914, two consecutive excerpts where through the narrative techniques of flashback and boxing the form of the Mermaid is described and the relevant legend about Alexander the Great and the immortal water is quoted (Estia Publ., pp. 119–122). Finally, the boxed excerpt where a different narrative version of the Little Red Riding Hood tale is presented, which refers to the enthusiasm of the little heroes who hear the tale sometimes from their grandmother and sometimes from their grandfather, as in the narratives of the two old men the narrative plot, the place of action but also the characteristics of his faces are completely different... “And Little Red Riding Hood’s grandma was beautiful too! Only...that, only that she was...different” (Estia Publ., pp. 75–77). The grandfather’s version of his love for the natural environment in which he lives is evident. “Grandpa’s Little Red Riding Hood” was used as a model for our students in order to create their own original stories about the most popular heroine.

And of course poetry is not missing from our educational programs. The images that are formed in the perception of toddlers in listening to the lyrics are a result of the iconoclastic quality of poetic speech (Benekos, 1981). Among the poetic works that functioned as stimuli of the children’s imagination in our case, I mention for

example “*Xanthoula*” by Solomos, “*Gatos*” by Tantalidis, the collections “*Games of heaven and water*” by Ritsos and “*The ro of Love*” by Elytis.

Sometimes we leave the students themselves the freedom of choice. Here students are encouraged to bring to class each one their “favorite book” that they consider the most favorite of all they have read. In fact, our specific choice was absolutely justified, as the corresponding educational program entitled Readers and Friends, which was submitted to the Innovation and Excellence in Education competition in 2013 was included in the 100 winners.

6. Results

Any implemented educational program is not justified by the intentions but only by its results. We will therefore present at this point some of the many texts of toddlers created through about twenty-five programs, which took place over a period of more than fifteen years in public nursery schools in West Attica in order to prove what we claimed here for the cultivation of creative thinking.

We start with the Aeolian Earth excerpt for the Mermaid. The little student writes:

Four ships are traveling in the calm sea. In one of them there is a passenger who has traveled to the farthest oceans, crossed all the sea and now returns to his place to find his friends again. They all go together to eat and drink to celebrate their meeting. The man who came from the oceans enters the sea to swim. He feels something, he thinks that a fish is touching him. But it is not a simple fish but a mermaid with a pink tail, whose hair is blue like sea water, and her eyes are green. Her look is happy because she knows this man. She had met him on his voyages to the oceans and had reached there following his ship. The man took her in his arms, pulled her out of the water and as soon as he touched her on land, the Mermaid became a normal person. His friends then left him and went away. They were angry with him because the rule said that mermaids are forbidden to come out of the sea water because their tail will never grow again.

We continue with episodes narrated by toddlers either individually or in five-member subgroups, in the first person, creating the Diary of Trelantonis:

My aunt made sweet raspberries, because she said that I am a very good kid today. John came to visit us. We played “dark room”. We skipped classes from school and lied that we were sick. Our aunt believed us because with the dryer that dries the hair we had warmed our forehead. When our aunt left for work, we got the kitchen utensils to play music. Since John liked them very much, I gave him the kitchen utensils to take them home and play his favorite song.

I was playing football. I thought to laugh a little, though. I left the ball and got dressed as a vampire. I went to Alexandra. She was alone in her room painting. As soon as she saw me, she ran out to ask for her aunt’s help. She told her to take the broom and chase away the vampire. I took off the vampire costume, locked it in the closet and went to the yard. Her aunt was looking to find out what scared Alexandra. I was playing football so that she would not understand me. She sent me, though, to my room for the whole day. She is sure I did it. I lay down on my bed. Her aunt came in. She looked like a vampire and threw the strongest cop at me. I told her “It wasn’t me, aunt”, but she continued to beat the cops. I counted five hundred. I woke up and only then I realized that all this happened in my dream; it was a nightmare. This was the worst day of my life. I had never been hit more. She usually threw two or three cops at me.

Next, we will move on to the Aeolian Earth excerpt again, this time on the subject of Little Red Riding Hood. Here are two stories of boys who chose to identify with the Wolf:

Little Red Riding Hood has a flashlight to see the road when she goes to her grandmother’s home which

is in the mountains near my house. I want this flashlight to be mine. I also want her grandmother's watch to become mine. What others have, I envy them all and want them mine. So, when I see Little Red Riding Hood, she panics. But she catches up and shouts "Mom, mom". She listens to her and chases me with a grandmother's rake.

Every day I enter Little Red Riding Hood's house through the window when everyone is away and I look for the cupboards. I find potatoes, cucumbers, tomatoes, toast bread and make sandwiches and salads. I eat them and go back to the forest to sleep. One day when they were away at the supermarket, I was making cookies. I heard them coming back and immediately jumped out of the window. Flour was spilled on the floor and I left the house dirty; I didn't have time to clean it. So, they realized that someone was coming in and put a camera in the house. Since then, I cannot go. Now I go and eat at her grandmother's home. If they find out, Little Red Riding Hood's dad, who is a hunter, will come to the forest to kill me.

And we conclude with a narration of a subgroup for the poem of Elytis "Maya", which is included in an educational program, which was presented and distinguished in the program of i-create "100 years later...":

The little stars that are Puglia's children are in the sky. They shine because it's night, and they sleep and dream. Dreams make them shine. Just because they are close, they all have the same dreams. Now they see a clown joking and laughing. Their mum Puglia cooks soup with the greens she picked from the clouds. It is the only food they eat a lot. Puglia shines too. She doesn't shine when she dreams, she shines when her children shine. Puglia finds a home on earth because, when it blows in the sky, her children get cold. And inside the house, the little stars shine at night because they continue to dream. Now they see that they have gone to a children's party where a magician displays animals. The little stars laugh because the animals tickle them. People who see the house shining from afar wonder "Who lives there?"

7. Conclusions

The main goal of cultivating creative thinking and the individual goals we set regarding the use of literature in education have been fully achieved. This is evidenced by the citation of the results of our various educational programs, in which literary texts are used as a stimulus for the creation of original narrative texts by toddlers. The toddlers' interest in the programs remained intact throughout their duration. Equally impressive is the fact that all toddlers watched with great interest the stories of their classmates, a fact that is proved by the complete relevance, the sequence, the correlation between the participations of all toddlers in the same group narration. In self-employment, question-and-answer sessions among toddlers, which were mentioned in the respective program, became one of the most popular activities. In fact, the toddler who was asked by his classmate pretended to record the answers imitating the recording by the teacher. His questions to his classmate were completely related to the previous answers.

We believe that these programs could easily be implemented in any nursery school as well as in the first three grades of elementary school, giving young students the opportunity to express their personal details by identifying with the narrative characters and expressing their wishes for the development of the plot of various literary texts.

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