

GREECE AS A NEW HOMELAND: Studying the Greek pupils' perceptions on refugees from Syria

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ABSTARCT

The present study focuses on the visual practices and the ways in which the concept of homeland is constructed and interpreted by the Greek pupils regarding to refugees children from Syria.

The research material is structured by the visual questionnaires differently for each grade. Methodologically we apply a qualitative research method by collecting visual questionnaires from forty (40) pupils. This research explores the image through visual questionnaires and visual literacy (Imago, 2010, Lieber & Schnell, 2008).

The research lasted two (2) weeks in classrooms, one (1) week in the preschool group and one (1) week in elementary school. The parents' suspicion against the thematic of research was a barrier to the process. The vast majority of parents refused to take part in the survey. Thus many primary schools have been searched in order to find the students composition for the sample.

Concluding the research and gathering the results through the answers of the students, proposals can be made for the renewal of Greek education in the direction of an anti-racist pedagogy, free of stereotypes and racial prejudices. Discovering the just definitions for Multicultural education and anti-racist education it leads us to the conclusion of the main differences between the two. The approach of multicultural education seems to be more proactive and encouraging of diversity in a learning environment: anti-racist education has the presumption that racism is already present, and aims to change the actions already involved in the classroom rather than prevent them.

INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on the concept of *homeland regarding to the preschoolers'* as well as the pupils' of the sixth (6th) grade of the Greek primary school perception. The research material's structure is based on the pupils' answers, collected using visual questionnaires (Imago, 2010:28) different for each school grade. Methodologically, a qualitative research method is applied on forty (40) pupils' visual questionnaires.

Given the strong visual stimulus, pupils got inspired and expressed their opinions on the research subject. The research was conducted over a two (2) weeks period in school classrooms; the first week in YMCA's Preschool and in 17th's Primary school of Kalamaria.

The pupils willingness to participate in the research, expedited the process, whereas, the parents' suspicion against the concept of the research constituted a hindrance to the process. The vast majority of parents didn't allow their children to participate in the research, resulting in the need to extend the search among many public primary schools in order to find a satisfactory pupil population for the sample. The results of this study could offer proposals for the renewal of the Greek education, aiming at an antiracist pedagogical approach, free from stereotypes and racial prejudices.

Early childhood educators should receive social studies-specific professional development that includes guidance on how to teach social studies to young learners to cultivate bias-free and discrimination-free communities. Many educators underestimate the capacity of young children to have an opinion and engage in the cultural and civic life of a community. Lack of appropriate preparation may cause both preservice and experienced teachers to fail to see social studies as a priority for young children and to lack confidence in their ability to teach social studies effectively. Thus, both preservice education and continuing professional development experiences need to place greater emphasis on encouraging teachers' repertoire of pedagogic practices, materials, and resources for building positive social studies attitudes and dispositions, valuing the contributions of young children as citizens who enrich their communities now and in the future (Durden et al., 2015; Gay, 2000; Goodman & Hooks, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

METHODOLOGY

As a research strategy we propose the case study, providing that it is a focused strategy which bears in mind its context (Robson, 2007:211). In the present study the pupils themselves gather the case study, provided that it's a research approach which allows a multifaceted examination of a phenomenon (Robson, 2007:211). The term "case" refers to a small group of people or to a problematic situation. Thus, the number of forty (40) pupils, who took part in the research is sufficient and covers epistemologically the research needs. The case study considers to be the most ideal strategy to investigate a school phenomenon: according to Thomas Schwandt "In case that the object under investigation is a modern phenomenon of real life, the submitted questions should be quite open, focusing on how and why, so that the researcher will not enforce limited control over the events being studied". Thus, these parameters can also be covered by the geographic choice of schools and the qualitative selection of the subjects of the survey (Schwandt, 1997). Having collected the material, using the visual questionnaire and the brainstorming, the procedure continues by classification, analyzing and processing the multimodal material. At this point, we follow the socio-semiotic and interpretative method as techniques of the visual and linguistic questionnaire which constitutes the research.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a useful method which can be used by the pedagogue in a very easy way, because pupils can participate without having any specific knowledge about the negotiating issue. Pupils participate in an active way in the whole procedure expressing their own personal point of view, without having the stress of criticizing their ideas. It should be

mentioned that another positive aspect of that method is that pupils do not have to know the negotiating issue in depth. Thanks to the offered pedagogic freedom, pupils express their ideas, even they are not directly related to the issue, but in that way ideas can be collected in order to be used in the future (Courau, 2000). This technique can be applied in the classroom with the pedagogue as an administrator, but can be also be evaluated in smaller groups.

The visual questionnaire

The visual questionnaire (Imago, 2010:106) seems to get over the traditional methods of research, action and role playing, which are usually applied in the preschool education. Through structured and free play, children establish meaningful relationships with peers and educators, and engage in physical, cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional aspects of learning. This process of learning through play is age-appropriate and naturally occurring for young children (Epstein, 2014; Gronlund & Rendon, 2017; Mindes, 2005, 2015).

More precisely, the main idea of planning the research material, focuses on the consideration that in our days, children have to come across the visual and oral processing of information, in order to communicate, to exchange ideas and to realize new data (Jürgens, 2000). Thought virtual literacy doesn't consist a systematic and empirical subject of study in the Preschool Education or in the first classes of Primary school, its scientific links are scattered in the sciences, such as History, Philosophy, Art and Pedagogy, from a very early on. The proposed visual questionnaire is consisted of specific chosen images and questions in order to focus on pupils' perception.

The social-semiotic method

In order to choose and analyze the images, we apply the social-semiotic method of Gunther and Kress, which is ideal to process multimodal materials because it creatively enlarges the direction of material analysis (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996/2001). Moreover, this analysis "meets up" the reading of the visual communication. In that point of view, the recruitment of the immigrant and of the homeland is not given and fixed, but comes from a variety of contexts, such as the class, social and cultural identity of pupils, the school and the contact with adults and mass media (Koutsogiannis, 2011:220). From the social-semiotic point of view, we use the co-declaration and the theory of gaze, which combined with the most common typology are based on the subject who looks. The definition of social learning, as a psychological theory, presents the pupil's behavior which is regulated, influenced and controlled by environmental aspects and not just as internal and inherent forces. The American psychologist Albert Bandura supports that learning possesses a major role in the development of children (Bandura, 1971). Children observe others, imitating their movements or behaviors and in that way they are able to learn. They learn the participation, the cooperation with others and the social interaction.

Classroom discourse analysis

The answers are taken are considered as the 'school discourse' of the research subjects and they are systematically coded, broken down into thematic sections of oral speech (for children) and written (for elementary pupils) discourse. Classroom discourse analysis has a rich bibliography whose scientific roots go back to the 1960s and 1970s. The first attempts,

mainly quantitative ones (Flanders, 1970. Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) have established many doctrines known as IRE/F- Initiation, Response, Evaluation/Feedback (Cazden 2001. Rampton, 2006 . Walsh, 2011).

The research

More precisely, pupils of YMCA’s Preschool and 17ths Primary school of Kalamaria in Thessaloniki, had been asked to answer the following questions;

- What do you see?
- What do this pictures remind you?
- Where do you think these pictures have been captured?
- Which is the picture you prefer the most. Why?
- Which is the picture you don’t like? Why?

As far as the pictures are concerned, the criteria of their choice had been the realistic rendering of the destroyed cities in comparison to homeland and to immigrants.

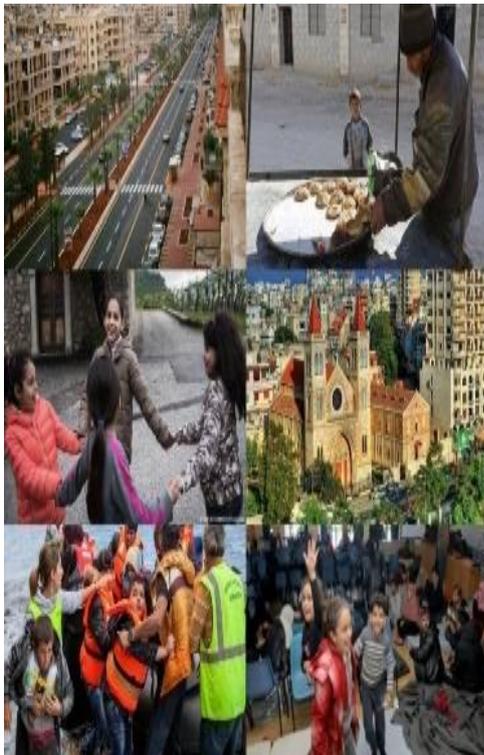


Image 1



Image 2

The research material is structured by transcribed texts of twenty (20) preschool education pupils, whose answers are analyzed as a classroom discourse analysis (Flanders, 1970, Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). For all these reasons we propose the visual questionnaire as a literacy event, which is used as a technique for the material collection, but also as a new teaching proposal. The preschool pupils are ten (10) girls and ten (10) boys. All pupils have Greek origin and nationality. Also, all pupils communicate in Greek language, which is their

mother tongue. The primary school pupils are eleven (11) girls and nine (9) boys. From the total pupil population, seventeen (17) of them have Greek origin and use the Greek language. The rest of the pupils have mixed nationalities and communicate in more than two (2) languages, using the Greek one as the basic language of communication and education. Totally, forty (40) visually questionnaires have been collected and the duration of the research lasted for a whole week, in both school grades. Preschool education pupils' answers had been recorded and decrypted afterwards. All the answers were given atomically, during the procedure of the free game activities. On the contrary, primary school's pupils answered the visual questionnaire as well as the questions during a school hour of forty five (45) minutes. It's important to mention that all the answers were given without teaching or informing pupils about the issue of immigrants.

The visual questionnaire of the preschool education pupils is made up of six (6) images and the one (1) of the primary school pupils is structured by eight (8) images. All the images in total are different, except for the picture of "salvation" which is common in both visual questionnaires. The origin of the images comes from the internet and the choice criteria had been the timeliness, the recognition and the principles of the new cultural historiography, which includes not only snapshots of war, but also of the everyday life, combined with cultural practices in times of peace. The choice of images had been done with the criteria of photographic realism and the updating of visual material, as it is highlighted on the web for immigrants of Syria internationally.

RESULTS

Answering the visual questionnaires, the pupils, according to their own experiences, social background, family values and based on other personal aspects, expressed their personal point of view concerning homeland and Syrian immigrants. At a first glance, it seems that just a small sample of preschool education pupils is informed about Syrian immigrants, in comparison to primary school's pupils who seem to be well informed in total. Moreover, pupils' ideas of both grades, according to the issue of poverty and the presentation of a big urban center seem to match and to share common point of views. More precisely, preschool education's pupils seem not to know about the refugee crisis in Syria, neither about the immigrant population. Decrypting the answers of preschool education pupils, we realize that the majority of them are born and raised in models of Western European culture, in which they feel comfortable and they find common parts with their local culture. Also, children commented on poverty which could be recognized on the images, expressing feelings of sadness and aversion. Moreover, children expressed in a very precise way their personal views about homeland, mentioning that they would like their country be like America or Europe and at the same time sharing common ideas concerning the presence of cars, big roads, big buildings and bright colors.

On the other hand, the pupils of the sixth (6th) grade of the Greek primary school seem to be more informed about the refugee flows. All pupils named refugee women as "foreigners" due to the dress code. Also, the pupils in total mentioned that the second picture shows refugee

children the moment of their arrival in the new homeland, during their salvation or escape from their country of origin. Moreover, part of pupils commented on war's consequences, which could be perceived through the ruins of the destructed city. In this category images which represent the bombed city are not included. More precisely, part of the pupils mentioned that the environmental pollution or other physical disasters, such as earthquakes and fires, is the basic reason for which the city is being destructed. In this point, seems that usually pupils got confused with the consequences of the war and the physical disasters. A common point of view between pupils of the preschool education and of the primary school is the familiarity and identification presenting the pictures of the modern cities of Syria, because they find common parts with the cities they live in. Also, many pupils answered that they could easily live in these cities, or that they might present a neighborhood that they haven't been yet, an element which indicates that they consider them close to their model of modern societies. Finally, another common part is the reorganization of the poverty. Most of the pupils recognized the poverty in the pictures, expressing their physical disgust to it and at the same time separating themselves and the Greek society they live in. Moreover, many pupils expressed their phobia that Greece might be as poor as the cities in the pictures.

Remarks

Using the results of this research, we can contribute with ideas to educational anti-racist and anti-war actions in the modern postmodern European education. The Greek modern preschool education seems to be a sterilized pedagogical environment of experiences and stimuli, as far as diversity and acceptance is concerned. The teacher-centered system and the sterile reproduction of themes, combined to the absence of experimental actions meaningful to children lead to the inability to form a new dynamic for preschool education pupils. At the same time, it seems that Greek families, decide not to share the true dimension of facts with preschool age children, due to their inability to express themselves or to the conviction that children will not be able to understand. Furthermore, educators decide not to work on social themes, either being afraid of the possibility that parents will be angry to them, or not being unable to support the pedagogical thematic unity.

Having as a base that preschool education should be depended on experiences, the Greek preschool education's program should incorporate social themes, such as the immigration and the active citizenship provided that children can get easily in touch with the new experience in their everyday life, just having a walk to the city. Another crucial issue is the lifelong and continuous education of pedagogues, who should slipped away from the traditional themes of the typical education and start to incorporate values of life, such as solidarity, acceptance and diversity around the person, constructing in that way the base of the new thinking people.

As far as Greek primary school is concerned, having a look at pupils' answers', we realize that pupils at that grade seem to be more familiar to anti-racist and contemporary post-modern European education. In that case, parents and educators too, should speak open to children for these "taboo" issues. Nevertheless, it seems that the given direction doesn't focus on the acceptance, respect and awareness of diversity and / or action to combat it, but on the contrary on its sterile recognition.

Examining pupils' answers seems that children have some basic information about the war in Syria and the refugee crisis, without expressing willingness to accept refugees, or even expressing feelings of compassion and support for them. On the contrary, all pupils' answers focus on the poverty and to refugees' difficult living conditions in their everyday life. As far as homeland is concerned, pupils of the (sixth) 6th grade of the Greek primary school seem to be open in accepting the western culture, without supporting the same way the corresponding culture of the Arab countries. Consequently, it's important that education focus in awareness and acceptance with experiential elements which will parallel their lives to refugees.

To sum up, the present research of homeland and refugee flow to Greece, constantly bring to light new and rich findings that enrich the relevant literature with the aim of both designing effective pedagogical actions as well as raising awareness of the new thinking citizens who will be open to anti-racism issues. The findings provide a framework for an holistic approach, in which the refugee community is being recognized not only as active knowledgeable of needs and difficulties, but also as a source of support and toughness (Goodman. et. al., 2004).

Examining the pupils' answers from both grades, emerges the need of remodeling the existing school program, incorporating anti-racist experiential actions, based on the contemporary post-modern education. Children, as young incubators and modern thinking citizens should be educated in recognizing the others as citizens, creating a new dynamic of acceptance and solidarity on which the modern Greek/European multicultural society would be based. Speaking of citizenship in contemporary society means to emphasize the right to identity difference and participation in social as well as political dimensions. Faced with the withdrawal of government in many social domains, citizens of neoliberal states must be more active in order to ensure the standards and services they are accustomed and entitled to. In the contemporary world, schools, along with families, play a crucial role in preparing youth for lives as active citizens (Lawson, 2001).

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