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Educational interventions on ‘other-ness’: Co-operative learning within intercultural children’s literature teaching in the Muslim minority schools in ‘Western Thrace’* (Greece)

GEORGIADIS FOKION¹, Primary school teacher, MA in Comparative Education, Institute of Education, University of London, Doctoral student, IOE, University of London

KOUTSOURI ANNA, Primary school teacher, MA student, Demokrition University of Thrace

ZISIMOS APOSTOLOS, Primary school teacher, MA in Primary Education, London Brunel University, Doctoral student, Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki

Abstract

Cultural diversity has always been a characteristic of most educational systems, Greek one included. As regards to the Greek educational context presence of minority school populations was purposively kept out of the official curriculum and superseded. The charged arena of minority education in Greece poses a challenge for pedagogy which demands rethinking the agency of the pupil and deconstructive practices of representation and collaboration. While there has never been an orthodoxy or consistency in tackling questions of cultural diversity and representation, post-structuralist theorisations of identity and diversity have been clearly influential in this arena. In this line of thoughts, everyday school life continuously offers chances for scrutiny often more unconventional than the traditional ‘subjects’ of the official curriculum. Children’s literature might be part of this process when approached through collaborative modes.

This presentation focuses on the contemporary critical multicultural praxis of children’s literature within the framework of principles of co-operative education as it is articulated in primary schools of the Muslim minority in Western Thrace (Greek Thrace). Differentiated collaborative pedagogies and particular instructive strategies regarding children’s literature are highly recommended in those specific school contexts. Taking those pupils’ cultural background into deeper consideration and using collaborative schemes of work creates more intrinsic motives to pupils while enhances representation, tolerance and empathy.

Introduction

Cultural diversity has become one of the biggest issues in international cultural policy of today and in the contemporary Greece multiculturalism appears lately as a dominant characteristic. Greece is facing big changes in its population and social structure. Societies like the Greek one that used to wrongly be considered fairly monocultural are appearing in the last two decades as more diverse due to the

¹ Postal address: 4, Kimis street - 104 46 Athens – GREECE, E-mail address: azfg2005@yahoo.gr

increasing flow of re-emigrants of Hellenic origin from the former Soviet Union (Pontians) and Albania, financial migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Additionally, populations in the Hellenic territory, which were recognized by the Treaty of Lausanne as Muslim minority (of Turkish origin, Pomaks, Roma), were long neglected (Kanakidou, 1994; Tsitselikis & Christopoulos, 1997; Trubeta, 2001) and deprived of participation in education and even today the percentage of illiteracy and school failure among them is still high (Katsikas & Politou, 1999).

These previously and newly established demographic changes are obviously reflected in the Greek schools of all levels where a great number of culturally diverse pupils study imposing changes in the educational system as well (Markou, 1996; Damanakis, 1997; Georgiadis and Zisimos, 2005). Besides, education may become the best vehicle for the transformation of a society, unless it is not bounded to its reproductive mechanisms. It has to follow the changes of the society and find ways to cope effectively with them.

In this line of thoughts, intercultural education appears necessary and decisive condition for the smooth operation of a multicultural society. This diversity of society has also encouraged educators to examine new definitions of literacy and new teaching and learning methods and strategies. Co-operative teaching has been considered by many scholars and researchers as the most effective method for intercultural education (Johnson & Johnson, 1974; Slavin, 1979; Batelaan *et al.*, 1993; Singh, 1995; Ben-Ari & Kedem-Friedrich, 1996; van Driel, 1999; Díaz-Aguado & Andrés, 2000; Verlot & Pinxten, 2000; Brettell, 2000; Batelaan & Gundare, 2000; Batelaan, 2000; van den Branden & van Koen, 2000; Kujansivu & Rosell, 2000; Gillies, 2007). Co-operative teaching and learning contribute to social integration of individuals of different origins or abilities while it blunts the competitive and rejective attitudes or practices. It is also indicative that this method is met more often in multicultural societies and classrooms. Unfortunately, in contemporary Greek school it is frontal teaching and '*ex cathedra*' pedagogy that dominates education. Applying co-operative teaching constitutes a difficult task either for teachers or for pupils.

Muslim minority education in Thrace

Since there has been a significant population of Muslim citizens in the Greek region of Thrace (referred to as the Muslim minority), attention was given to the educational needs of this group. In 1995, the Greek government has attempted to improve the

educational opportunities of the members of the Muslim minority in Western Thrace and a bilingual programme was granted in special minority schools in terms of the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) and the relevant Greek laws (Baltsiotis & Tsitselikis 2001; Mavrommatis & Tsitselikis 2003). The optional study of the Turkish language into the Greek mainstream high schools of the region, for Muslim and Christian pupils, is under consideration and not yet implemented. This would be the first step towards a sustainable intercultural education based on the mutual exchange of cultural experience.

Moreover, a large-scale, interdisciplinary Project for Reform in the Education of Muslim Children (PEM) in Western Thrace, Greece, was implemented during the years 1977–2004. PEM is a specifically educational project entailing teaching Greek as a second language, development of educational materials, teacher training and academic outcome (PEM, 2002; 2004; Dragonas & Frangoudaki, 2006). The aims of the project are to improve the educational provision for students from this Muslim minority and to promote the principles and philosophy of intercultural education (Magos, 2007). This project expresses a new *'radical'* educational policy aiming at equity for the minority children in Thrace but the changes achieved in the educational reality of the Muslim minority are not only the result of PEM alone. These changes *'reflect the overall transformation of the Greek society from tradition to modernity'* (Dragonas & Frangoudaki, 2006, p.36). During last years, participation in education of Muslim minority pupils in Thrace has significantly increased in fast rhythms (Table 1).

	Pupils in the primary minority schools in Thrace
1991-92	7.248
2002-03	6.887
2006-07	6.647

(Table 1 - Project for Reform in the Education of Muslim Children, PEM, 2007)

In 2000, the drop-out rates of minority education in Thrace was 65%. Today that the first students have graduated throughout the new project, the rates have fallen in half. This is still enormous taken into consideration that the national rate is 7% (PEM, 2007). Additionally, gender issues were also elaboratively and effectively addressed and promoted through this project. Hence, girls' school attendance has remarkably increased.

In general, minority issues of education in Thrace are being constructed and move in within the dipolar discourse of '*other-ness and same-ness*'.

The role of education in constructing identity and '*other-ness*'

Today, we are invited to recognize that we live within the framework of a multicultural society whose members are bearers of diverse cultures and traditions. Goodenough (1981) coins a term, '*propriospect*', to refer to the '*private, subjective view of the world and of its content*', which includes the various standards for perceiving, evaluating, believing, and '*doing that an individual attributes to other persons as a result of his or her experience of their actions and admonitions*' (ibid, p. 98). Wolcott (1991) elaborates on the meaning of the term '*propriospect*' to illustrate how individuals develop personal versions of a culture through personal contacts with others with different sets of standards. Through these contacts they acquire some of the new standards. As a result, they become increasingly multicultural. Instead of trying to entrench ourselves in the name of our difference so as to maintain our '*national*' identity unalterable (Frangoudaki & Dragonas, 1997), we should concede the '*different*' as bearer of new experiences and knowledge a positive dimension and admit that coexistence among people is social wealth. As to '*nation*' there appears a certain inherent ambiguity with reference to time. This ambiguity '*haunts*' the idea of '*nation*' (Bhabha, 1990) and is expressed through differentiated representations that invoke maintenance of tradition and at the same time modernization. The same ambiguity is observed when referring to '*national*' identity through a selective social memory. In this context, historic and social events are distorted and transformed, some are magnified and others silenced on the altar of '*national*' identity construction. Taking all the above into account, when it comes to culture and otherness the role of education stands extremely important. It is to promote the dominant culture or the interaction among different cultures on the basis of a democratic form of government, respect and equality before the law (Parekh, 2000). Every individual belongs to a range of different groups, and therefore has a range of different loyalties. Also, and partly in consequence, all individuals change and develop. Pupils need to know and feel confident in their own identity but also to be open to change and development, and to be able to engage positively with other

identities (Richardson, 2004). Particularly in the first years the process of education is centred on the child and less on knowledge. It is in this phase where the individual receives and first senses the prevalent notions of our civilization. It is then that the first convictions about social relations and the individual's own position in the already familiar world are formed. Of course, family, neighbourhood and friends play a quite significant role. If we perceived civilization and culture as something static, without any dynamic whatsoever, then it would be easy to deal with the '*other*' as a closed system, controllable and countable concerning contact with the domestic pupil population. That is, apparently, the way in which everything has been considered to date, which has resulted in marginalization of minority groups and immigrants. However, as civilization is an open, ever-evolving system, osmosis and hybridity (Bakhtin, 1981; Bhabha, 1990; Hall, 1990; Gilroy, 1993; Spivak, 1994; Pieterse, 2004; Sen, 2006) among different cultures and civilizations are inevitable. These are the chief reasons why education has failed to meet its goals so far and is currently being oriented to the intercultural dimension of the state educational system.

Up to now, the Greek syllabus aims at knowledge, adoption and reproduction of the '*dominant*' national culture and language (PEM, 2002) without taking into consideration the various cultures that emerge even within the Greek territory (Frangoudaki, 1990). These cultures are depreciated whereas dialects are presented as comical and special languages that different social groups develop are considered as almost transgressive. Nevertheless, this presentation also takes into consideration the parallel exploration of socio-political process of constructing minorities (minoritisation) (Trubeta, 2001; Gotovos, 2002; Papataxiarchis, 2006) and how they are the ideologically perceived and represented. A basic problem emerging when one deals with the minority of Thrace has to do with the name used for the overall minority as well as for particular groups inside it (of Turkish origin, Pomaks, Gypsies) (Trubeta, 2001; Demetriou, 2004). The treaty of Lausanne guarantees the right for the Muslim minority to be taught the Turkish language. But the Muslim minority does not include only people of Turkish origin but also other ethnic groups such as Pomaks and Gypsies whose mother tongue is not officially recognized, it is oral and is not taught at school. Parallely, ethnocentrism arises as the cardinal element of subjects such as History (Avdela, 2000) and '*Modern Greek*' literature (Greek Pedagogical Institute, 2005). The latter distort history and promote the Greek language and culture through selected authors whose works favour ethnocentrism.

The ultimate objective is national cohesion as well as adoption and reproduction on pupils' part of the dominant ideology (faith in hierarchy and the stereotypical perceptions about the 'other' sex, race or class). Nowadays, education in schools aims to teach obedience, submission and marginalisation (Chomsky, 2000).

In this context, people of different cultural background are invited to be assimilated and subjugated as well as to embrace values within the Aristotelian framework that determines the goal of education until today. Nevertheless, we do concede that such a framework does not meet the real needs of young people nowadays, nor can it function in the new historic conditions. In an era that different civilizations come into daily contact and information is produced very rapidly and without intermediaries (internet) objectives of education change. Cultural and pupil identity cannot be constructed through monolithic school practice. On the contrary, it has to be produced within the contemporary cultural and social context. Unquestionable adoption of a historically distinctive and homogeneous yet fabricated culture cannot constitute an objective. Nor should such a culture be deemed as dominant and superior when absorbed by pupils, since it dooms them to passivity and submissiveness, let alone meaningless knowledge. What is more, it engenders inequalities in the education process thus resulting in social and cultural exclusions. Rosaldo (cited in Lugo, 1997, p. 51) critiqued the fallacy of cultural homogeneity, especially in the pluralistic setting:

'[H]uman cultures are neither necessarily coherent nor always homogeneous. More often than we usually care to think, our everyday lives are crisscrossed by border zones, pockets and eruptions of all kinds'.

If we recognize civilization as a social scope for collective and individual production of meaning through social conflicts and political inequalities; if we concede that deviant thought and practice is creation and we acknowledge that the role of pedagogy is not a mere mechanism for conveying knowledge and information, then we may recognize education as a cultural practice whose goal is to render learning '*part of the process of social change*'. Then we will recognize our pupils not as passive receptors of knowledge, perceptions and attitudes but as participants in and formers of the '*social becoming*'. Taking all the above into consideration, objectives and contents along with tools and methods used in those school practices change or should further change. Children's literature may be an area of innovation within this framework.

Children's Literature and Ideology

Children's Literature is an important tool subject in school practice. The art of speech is the '*impractical*' speech. By the word Literature we mean a sort of self-reporting language, that is a language which speaks of itself. Literature cannot be '*defined objectively*'. Therefore, in the final analysis literature depends on the way we decide to read it and not on the nature of the written text (Eagleton, 1997). Even today, literary texts which are chosen in education as well as the way they are taught aim at national edification (Ikonomidou, 2000; Papachristos, 2000). In order that the '*we*'-and-'*the-others*' dipole might be preserved, the attributes of '*we*' are permanently presented as positive and unique. Consequently, the comparison with the '*others*' is bound to render the latter negative, even inimical (Faubion, 1993). This helps the familiar group to concentrate around a common imaginary, the national cohesion. Depending on the social, political and economic circumstances the imaginary distinction between the '*we*' and the '*others*' assumes considerable adaptivity and transformative power. What we usually observe is that this distinction is reinforced by state institutions in an attempt to face problems arising in the interior of the familiar group (Ampatzopoulou, 2001).

It is through school, the state ideological mechanism *par excellence*, that ideology is produced and maintained as long as individuals keep on believing that they are actors with personal capacity to think and act. In the realm of literature texts are open through their language and narrative code, their title and plot and their author's stance so that readers may identify with the author's perspective and embrace his/her ideas. The anti-hero incarnated by '*the other*' presents a literary stereotypical image which is static and recurrent as it forms the basis for the work to win the favour and acclaim of the culturally dominant group that is a reading audience sharing the same ideological constructs as the author's. Hence, in the reading process it cooperates with him/her so that the fabricated image of '*the other*' will be interpreted as objective. There is no need for this image to converge with reality, yet, in order to be interpreted accordingly it is indispensable that the same cultural scheme should underlie both the author's and reader's culture (Ampatzopoulou, 1998; Kayialis, 1999).

The author, who is also a member of the community, is influenced by the collective imaginary that develops in a particular time and place and may unhesitantly

choose to consciously impart specific ideological messages or to indirectly promote a passive ideology sometimes consciously yet not always (Kanatsouli, 2000). An even stronger ideological influence can be exerted through child literature since young pupils have less reading experience. Everyday changes, such as elements of multiculturalism that gradually permeate contemporary social reality, call for a new approach to literature with new goals and new perspectives so that young readers may have the possibility to interact with texts and authors as real actors. Intercultural literature can definitely help in this direction.

Co-operative learning in multicultural educational contexts

Cultural diversity among individuals creates an opportunity, but like all opportunities, there are potentially either positive or negative outcomes. Cultural diversity among pupils may result in increased achievement and productivity, creative problem solving, growth in cognitive and moral reasoning, increased perspective-taking ability, improved relationships, and general sophistication in interacting and working with peers from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). However, it may bring negative outcomes as well, such as lower achievement, closed-minded rejection of new information, increased egocentrism, and negative relationships characterized by hostility, rejection, divisiveness, bullying, stereotyping, prejudice, and racism (Disa-Brandstaetter, 2004). Once culturally diverse students are brought together in the same school, whether the diversity results in positive or negative outcomes depends largely on whether learning situations are structured competitively, individualistically, or co-operatively.

For the past half century Allport's (1954) '*contact hypothesis*' has served as the salient theoretical construct in the field of diversity and people's relations. Allport's hypothesis asserts that increased contact between members of different cultural groups will not necessarily reduce prejudice. For that to occur, four preconditions should be met: (1) equal group status within the situation, (2) common goals that require a measure of member interdependence to reach, (3) inter-group cooperation, and (4) authority support for cooperation (ibid). The translation of the contact hypothesis into school contexts has taken the form of co-operative learning (CL).

The widespread use of cooperative learning is due to multiple factors. It is based solidly on a variety of theories in anthropology (Mead, 1936), sociology

(Coleman, 1961), economics (von Mises, 1949), political science (Smith, 1759), psychology, and other social sciences. In psychology, where cooperation has received the most intense study, cooperative learning has its roots in social interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 1989), cognitive-developmental (Piaget, 1950; Vygotsky, 1978), and behavioral learning theories (Bandura, 1977; Skinner, 1968). It is rare that an instructional procedure is central to such a wide range of social science theories. Second, the amount, generalizability, breath, and applicability of the research on cooperative, competitive, and individualistic efforts provides considerable validation of the use of cooperative learning, perhaps more than most other instructional methods (Slavin, 1977a; b; Sharan, 1980; Cotton, 1993; Cohen, 1994; Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Cohen *et al.*, 1999; Johnson & Johnson, 1999a; b).

Having said that, the use of cooperative learning as a means to improving intercultural relationships is supported by more well-designed research than any other single schooling practice. Organizing learners into culturally heterogeneous teams, giving them tasks requiring group cooperation and interdependence, and structuring the activity so that the teams can experience success, comprise an extremely powerful means of enhancing intergroup relations (DeVries *et al.*, 1978; Rogers *et al.*, 1981; Slavin & Oickle, 1981; Warring *et al.*, 1985; Pate, 1988; Conard, 1988; Swadener, 1988; Foster, 1989; Hart & Lumsden, 1989; Parrenas & Parrenas, 1990; Slavin, 1990; Johnson *et al.*, 1998 and many others). Although the primary rationale for the initiation of cooperative learning arrangements is that they enhance student academic performance, several literature reviews have concluded that, when the conditions of the contact hypotheses are satisfied, the use of racially-heterogeneous student CL teams is associated with improved interracial relations (Khmelkov & Hallinan, 1999; Slavin & Cooper, 1999). The main pathway through which this occurs is believed to be the individual student's re-formulation of group membership criteria to include students previously consigned to an out-group into an expanded in-group (Gaertner *et al.*, 1990).

More concretely, Olsen & Kagan (1992) define co-operative learning as group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning. Why does cooperative learning have such positive effects? One reason, according to Parrenas & Parrenas (1990), is that research

demonstrates that people from many cultural minorities are relatively more cooperative in their basic social orientation than are members of the majority.

'The essence of the idea' writes Pate (1988, p. 288) *'is that when we share common problems, tasks, goals, and success with people of another ethnic group, we develop positive feelings toward them'*.

Additionally, Coelho (1994) argues that cooperative learning is especially appropriate for multi-cultural classrooms. She draws on research showing that students from a variety of cultural backgrounds learn best through co-operative activities and such activities enhance the learning of all students. She recommends heterogeneous groups of about four students, and suggests management routines which will help make the groups cohesive and cooperative.

In Greece, intellectuals supporting the demotiki* language (demoticists) such as Michael Papamavros, Myrsini Kleanthous-Papadimitriou, Alexandros Delmouzos and Miltos Kountouras (Hondolidou, 2004), Theofrastos Gerou have strongly supported and also applied co-operative teaching. In contemporary Greek education, co-operative teaching is newly recommended as a way to replace frontal teaching. Nevertheless, this is an issue that finds a lot of resistance.

Co-operative approach to Children's Literature in the Minority School

Taking into account the special characteristics of pupil population (gender, ethnotic or national origin, socioeconomic level) (Zografaki, 2004) along with the various interests of groups and individuals in places of education, there appear special educational needs that depend on pupils' cultural background. Co-operative teaching functions as a micrograph of society and is based on two basic principles: the principle of social correlation and interaction and the principle of interdisciplinarity (Hondolidou, 2004). Although school has already started to recognize *'other-ness'* and diversity as significant parameters of pupils' identity that should be allowed for, it does not yet seem to be capable of proper handling of such situations.

As for the National Curriculum, which is common in all schools, it does not yet provide for every pupil's particular needs and characteristics therefore being incapable of exploiting the latter to the maximum. Frontal teaching does not attribute anything to the environment of bilinguals and trilingual children having a different level of Greek language attainment and lack of literature reading experience (ibid). Thus, the learning process ends up in a Sisyphean effort with pupils getting tired and

indifferent to almost anything. As a result they lose heart and hold themselves responsible for school failure. What is more, pupils fail to even respond and participate, they refuse to come to terms with knowledge (Charlot, 1999) and finally become convinced – especially young pupils- that the sole thing school cares to provide is form and not content.

Therefore, co-operative approach is used as a means against stereotypical perceptions that render difficult learning and knowledge acquisition as well as collaboration among people. Collaboration in classroom endeavours to deconstruct the '*ghetto*' by constantly favouring multiple grouping (boys and girls, minority and majority pupils, successful and failing pupils, active and lazy ones etc.). Associated with versions of diversity, this methodology offers a means to overcome the danger of fragmentation and ability to cross boundaries and exercise critical discrimination in education. Last but not least, even the teacher undergoes changes both in cognitive as well as socio-emotional terms. This means that s/he is not just a transmitter and pupils just the receivers (didactic triangle). Quite the opposite, the teacher, far from being omniscient, realizes and accepts that s/he too is a bearer of views and perceptions. Consequently, new learning objectives and strategies are set and sought for not only by pupils but teachers as well.

Parameters such as social inequalities, stereotypes and prejudices (Dragonas, 2004), heterogeneity and language differences as well as distinct cultural origins influence school environment as a whole and call for differentiation and special didactic practices. There is a strong relationship between storybook reading in the home and beginning literacy development (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Early readers came from homes where they were read to frequently from the time they were only months old (Teale, 1981; Morrow, 1983; Clark, 1984). While many children come from homes rich in literacy events, we know that some children, especially those from economically disadvantaged communities, have less exposure to literacy experiences. Hence, the role of children's literature in the minority schools of Thrace is twofold, namely cognitive but above all social, while collaboration and co-operative strategies are basic tools for pupils to access and '*gain*' such literature.

Moreover, co-operative learning attaches particular importance to non verbal communication in school (Fiske, 1989) by recognizing '*voiceless*' groups. Instead of individualism and competition it promotes experimental knowledge and collective action through groups. Besides, formation of the co-operating groups is considered

one of the most critical points of co-operative approach. Pupils are involved in a process of dialogue in order to ascertain who of their schoolmates are suitable for the group in which they intend to participate. It is fundamental for this approach how the co-operating groups of children will be formed. In this enterprise it is the teacher's experience while as the desired outcomes that count most. For children's literature, the groups are good to be formed under the criterion of interest (Hondolidou, op cit.) and here comes again the experience of the teacher and how well s/he knows his/her pupils.

As far as the relation between pupils and *books* is concerned, we know in advance that it is negative (Apostolidou *et al.*, 2002). In daily school activities pupils have not the right of choice, so that they have been accustomed to stoically cope with material and content of taught subjects, even if they are not interested at all. Pupils' obligation with regard to classes entails an obligation with regard to books irrespectively of content. So, pupils evince no interest in coming into contact with any kind of written speech whatsoever, they do not know how to choose books analogous to their goals and interests and, finally, reading turns into an unbearable burden.

The process of teaching children's literature is one by which the teacher creates the circumstances (games, use of senses, prior experiences, groups and collaboration) so that both pupils and teacher may be motivated to conquer learning, cognitive and socio-emotional goals set beforehand. In this process small texts are more comprehensible and help pupils to co-operate more (Hondolidou, op cit.). Thus, co-operative approach intends to activate and motivate pupils so that the latter can express themselves through creative activities, such as games, dramatization, constructions, pantomime or fairy-tales (Koutsouri, 2004). It also endeavours to integrate creative forms of expression such as music, theatre, pantomime or dance into the learning process with a view to helping the individual fulfill its inner potential.

This programme of *collaborative reading activities* proposed here strives to bring pupils into contact with books in the first place in an effort to cause cracks in the stereotypically negative relationship between children and books and deal a blow to their stereotypical perceptions about the '*other*'. The teacher is not a mere part of the traditional educational triangle (teacher, pupil, material) but a part of an open educational process in which child literature can function as an assistant and coordinator in handling the concept of the '*other*' within school. Openness of its texts to interpretation (Kanatsouli, 2002) renders child literature suitable for bridging

concepts traditionally considered to be at odds with one another. Thus, instead of a single '*correct*' perspective, as this emerges from school books, we are given the possibility through a double narrative both textual and pictorial. Children's literature can further link pupils' social and personal experiences with the various cognitive subjects so that writing, reading and contact with books may not appear to pupils as obligatory but as sources of creation and pleasure (Anagnostopoulos, 1985). The result of such processes is critical and independent readers, conscious citizens '*of the world*' outside the narrow limits of the nation-state. Contemporary children's literature has started to adopt principles and rules pertaining to intercultural guidance. It is now oriented towards knowledge and acceptance of the similar or different '*other*' thus resulting in a better understanding of the latter (Triandafyllou, 2000). Authors give a chance to '*authentic*' voices of the '*others*' and impart alternative worldviews for the sake of pluralism. Indeed, instead of trusting a predictable image of the world as is conveyed through stereotypes, authors can progressively deconstruct them by opposing to collective representations.

According to Richards & Rodgers (2001), co-operative learning, viewed as a learner-centered approach to teaching which offers advantages over traditional models of classroom methods, has been promoted and developed by educators who were concerned that traditional models of classroom learning were teacher-fronted and they fostered competition rather than cooperation. Of course, the change of teaching methodology from frontal into co-operative might cause problems between teacher-colleagues because in comparison to frontal teaching that allegedly keeps classroom in quietness, co-operative approach transforms the classroom into a '*noisy bee-hive*' of creativity, a creative laboratory of pupils in dialogue, '*destroying*' in this way '*the law and order*' of the classroom. Co-operative learning requires pupils to talk, discuss and interact, which can, at least initially, make teachers feel a loss of control over a class. In addition, teachers have worried over the ability to effectively assess pupils as individuals when they work in a group (Jolliffe, 2007). This resistance however to certain new instructive methodology is also attributed to what Fullan (1982) and Sarason (1982) report as '*resistance of educational mechanism to reformations*'. At the heart, perhaps, of any reluctance for teachers to use cooperative learning is what amounts to a totally different role for the teacher. The teacher becomes a facilitator of learning, organising, monitoring, supporting and intervening where appropriate. The teacher is not in the role of imparter of knowledge, firing questions at pupils - the

'chalk and talk' of common classroom practice. In effect, the teacher in cooperative learning has moved on a long way from the Rip Van Winkle example. He or she has become the teacher of the twenty-first century (Jolliffe, op cit.).

The blackbird and the white seagull bring colour to the village life: operationalisation of the intervention

The tale: The blackbird and the white seagull (Crowther, 1998)

The seagull meets the blackbird and they become friends. He invites the blackbird to his home village but the rest of the villagers do not accept the blackbird there and isolate them both. In the end, the community recognizes the blackbird's positive aspects and accepts their friendship. The action plan in question aspires to cause cracks in the stereotypical perceptions children nurture for '*the other*'.

Objectives of the action plan

The following objectives concern pupils:

1. Ideological Objectives
 - Removal of stereotypical perceptions concerning selection and absorption of knowledge: Instead of receiving ready knowledge from experts – teachers, parents or journalists- with a view to reproduction, the individual as child learns how to research and compose his/her own truth and knowledge
 - Reinforcement of collaboration among children through group activities and co-operative learning strategies.
 - Familiarization with issues of “diversity” (immigrants, minorities) as a first attempt at combating dominant stereotypes.
 - Reinforcement of pupils' self-esteem through expression of peculiarities and “deficiencies” they believe they have.
 - Reinforcement of democratic dialogue among class or group members and expression of oppositions and conflicts.

2. Pedagogical Objectives

- Recognition and comprehension of the pivotal role of pictures in books.
- Reinforcement of pupils' reading experience.
- Development of pupils' linguistic and cognitive abilities.
- Creation of readers with critical thought.
- Comprehension of the plot, the heroes and the time of the story.
- Ability to recognize those participating in book production, i.e. the author, illustrator, and publisher, and to find books by using such information.

As for the teacher objectives are as follows:

- i. New activities suitable for motivating a particular group of pupils.
- ii. Adaptation of past methods, strategies and experiences to new activities.
- iii. Cognitive feedback for the teacher regarding weekly activities so that planning the next activity can come naturally.
- iv. Building of a pleasant and collaborative atmosphere which renders reading entertaining and joyful.
- v. Establishment of a climate of fellowship and creativity.

Planning (total time: 55')

- Formation of the groups (10').
- The teacher reads the first story up till the middle of it (e.g. 'the white seagull-blackbird'). Photocopies for pupils; comments on text and pictures (10').
- Group working for all groups (10').
- Conversation on the outline of the subject – otherness with reference to colour and origin; problems; heroes' feelings; the outcome (10').
- Group representators' announcements (10').
- Reading the authors end – Evaluation (5').

Course of teaching: variety of methods and approaches

A. Pupils are grouped randomly in ten minutes. It is considered as important that those groups are as heterogeneous possible (gender, achievement, ethnicity or language) so as to develop positive relations. What is critical for the pupils is to know and attempt to collaborate also with people with whom they have not developed friendly relations. Nevertheless, balance has to be kept and the groups formed should be equivalent. The teacher tells children to sit in circles while handing out photocopies of the 1st story to every three or four of them. The photocopies relate the story up to the middle. Each page –text or picture- is commented upon. Subsequently, there follows group work and discussion about the ideological dimensions of the text: What is special about the hero? What are the adversities s/he faces? What is the attitude of the rest? The animator reminds pupils that it is the author that chooses the end of the story and spurs them to come up with an end at their own volition. Finally, s/he hands out the end of the story for the pupils to know. Last comments are made.

B. In the following class pupils' groups are given photocopies of the story without the text. There follow collective reading of pictures and comments on each one separately. The teacher asks the pupils' groups what the hero's feelings could be throughout the story and focuses on the distinction between 'we' and the 'others'. Then a conversation takes place for pupils express feelings possibly alike to those of the heroes. What happens when they feel outside of a group? Why does this happen? What is meant by "I am different"? Groups' announcements and discussion.

C. In the third class teacher randomly divides pupils into two groups and asks them to read it to themselves from photocopies (the end is not included) and decide upon a possible outcome. If there is great discord as to the best version, pupils may choose two of them as prevailing. Subsequently, pupils' groups present the story and the end they have chosen with few words. At the end, the whole class goes on to discuss problems of the 'other' as well as possible solutions to them.

Diversity with reference to origin and otherness (other activities)

The "something" and the "something else" (Cave & Riddell, 2002): The "something" is always making mistakes. It is different from other animals, so they are not friends with it. Some day the "something" meets a new friend. In the end, it makes friends with a child. They are all too different.

Give love (Varela, 2004): *In a school class children from Greece, Poland and Albania are invited to coexist. What does it mean to be an immigrant? How different are we? Can we all be friends in the end?*

Most participants in the activities were repatriated Greeks and minority pupils (Turkish speaking and pupils of Armenian origin).

Epilogue

The method used in this approach was the co-operative considering that this contributes to the collaboration among pupils while it helps them communicate and work for the success of their group, the '*common good*', far from individual objectives and national exclusions. Nevertheless, communal feelings and socialisation constitute principal aims of school-life within the frameworks of democratisation of the society. What impressed us most in those activities was the responsibility of the children, their harmonious and calm way of working and their catholic attendance. They were organised fast and without noise. They did not leave their groups for any reason indicating how serious the task was for them. They also used a collaboration low tone of voice in most of the activities. At the beginning, those pupils were not used to collaboration and showed competitiveness since this is regarded the basic characteristic of the traditional frontal classroom.

Through those co-operative reading activities in tackling the question of the '*other*' pupils had the opportunity to come into contact with books and recognize the pleasure of reading. This rarely happens in the case of school books. Moreover, they got to realize that the author is a person with his/her own opinion which the reader is not obliged to adopt. Quite the contrary, the reader may develop his/her own critical view (the pupils gave the story their own end or their own course through pictures). Additionally, they came into contact with various cases of discrimination among people. Thus, they first discussed the problems that the heroes faced and then their own problems. By means of co-operative reading, pupils became further acquainted with adversities faced by immigrant children but mainly with those faced by any individual that feels '*other*' or different, someone outside the group. The collaboration among the group members was successful and they enormously enjoyed their visual experience among themselves. They did not have the chance to face each other in the way their desks have been formed before those activities. Most importantly, children

got to know each other better. The '*aliens*' spoke of the life they left behind in their country, of their personal experiences and fears and of their otherness. They realized that they all had different characteristics and yet they had all sometimes been rejected. Someone suffered rejection because of excess weight and someone else was made fun of due to language mistakes. The girls felt that even their families treated them differently in comparison with boys while all pupils observed that their parents made them feel alien at home. Equally, they all mentioned the pressure they sensed due to parental expectations and they understood hardships basically faced by Russian children who were the least integrated and evinced aggressiveness towards others. It was as if they looked at one another, as if they met one another for the first time. The action plan lasted two months and included several activities within the framework of the all-day programme. At the end of the plan there were some minimal changes in pupils' behaviour. Their relationship with books improved and, although in the beginning they were frustrated at the sight of a book, they ended up looking forward for the next meeting.

During school breaks mockery and conflicts went on but pupils allowed the '*other*' pupils to participate in some cases. The '*other*' pupils gave to some children the opportunity to approach them and became more open. In the initial activities and conversations these pupils did not participate at all and left classroom on any occasion. Progressively, they began to participate and quite later to express themselves (although with difficulty). In the middle of the program these pupils contacted the animator more frequently than others. Relations with other pupils took place at the end. The most important thing was that all pupils wanted our sessions to continue so that they could express their problems, worries and fears and speak freely, something they missed both in school and at home. One could not expect to observe big changes in so short a period, but it is certain that something changed, even temporarily, in intimate groups of pupils and in class.

As educators teachers have also experienced unique moments as well. They have experienced friendlier confrontation by pupils, increase of confidence, growth of positive climate, reduction of negative behaviour and greater attendance in classroom. All those feelings made the operation of the classroom more effective. The students worked with more enthusiasm and imagination, while they were more interconnected than before.

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* 'Western Thrace' refers to the area of Ancient Thrace which belongs to Greece, in conformity with the Treaty of Lausanne. After this Treaty (July 24, 1923), Eastern Thrace became part of Turkey and Western Thrace remained a part of Greece. Henceforth, Western Thrace will be referred, for reasons of economy, as 'Thrace'.

* demotiki (popular, spoken language).

Bio notes

Georgiadis Fokion (MA in Comparative Education) studied Pedagogy and Psychology in the Universities of Rhodes and Athens and worked as a Primary schoolteacher since 1988 in Greece and Britain. He participated in many conferences in Greece and abroad and authored intercultural educational material for University of Athens and Crete. At the moment he attends the Doctoral School of Education in the Institute of Education, University of London. His research interests are around Inter-/Multicultural aspects of education. He is a member of the International Association of Intercultural Education (IAIE), the Society of Intercultural Education, Training and Research (SIETAR Europa), the British Association for International & Comparative Education (BAICE), the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) and the Pedagogic Society of Greece (PSG).

Koutsouri Anna (MA student) studied Pedagogy in the Universities of Belgrade, Thessalia, Crete and Thrace. Since 1998 she works as a Primary school teacher in Muslim minority education in Thrace and in the relevant programme of the Athens University. She also works as a teachers' trainer on issues regarding Muslim minority and intercultural education. She has organized seminars and has also attended many conferences. She contributed in two publishing works on educational practices and techniques on minority education. At the moment, she reads for her MA in the University of Thrace on social animation training programmes.

Zisimos Apostolos (MA in Primary Education) studied Pedagogy in the Universities of Thessalia and Athens. He worked as a Primary school teacher since 1985 in Greece and Britain. He participated as presenter in various congresses on education in Greece and abroad. He co-operated with the University of Crete on the 'Education of the Greek Diaspora' programme (E.DIA.M.M.E). In 2005 he completed his postgraduate studies in the Brunel University in London on Primary Education. At the moment he is a doctoral student at the Doctoral School of Education, University of Thessaloniki. His research interests are around racism and cinematography in education. He is a member of the International Association of Intercultural Education (IAIE) and the Pedagogic Society of Greece (PSG).