

Preschool children's creation and storytelling through an element of their everyday life. The case of the program "The neighborhoods of Athens in a book"

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Abstract

In recent decades, many case studies have been carried out on the ability of preschool children to tell a story. Most studies take place in a kindergarten setting. The present research was conducted on the occasion of an educational program that took place within the framework of the "Open Schools" initiative. This institution offers free recreational and education programs to the children of the Municipality of Athens in neighborhoods facing serious economic problems due to the economic crisis. This program gave the opportunity to 25 preschool children to talk about their neighborhood and create their own book. Even though the conditions were not favorable (time was not enough and the children did not know each other), in the end they were able to tell and illustrate a story by choosing a single element of their environment. In this case study, children were encouraged to create and communicate through play and free expression.

Keywords: preschool children, oral language, storytelling, narrative discourse, improvisation, dramatic play

1. Introduction

Children's literature and especially the fairy tales in preschool children serve both pedagogical and aesthetic needs. Small children are particularly fond of hearing fairy tales and short stories, both modern and traditional. Narration of tales helps young children develop functions and skills such as expression, communication, recognition, recall, interpretation, analysis and synthesis. Very often, preschool children and older children create improvised stories. These fantastic stories of young children which do not follow rules, often lacking logical sequence, are of particular interest as they highlight the children's interests and desires. They can also reveal experiences from their close environment, but also their worries or fears.

The creation and storytelling contributes to the development of imagination, ingenuity, cultivates the language, and contributes to the socialization of the child. According to Tsilimeni, "the creation of improvised stories presupposes the function of thinking, imagination and speech" (Tsilimeni, 1996, p. 469). The young child, during improvisation, devises fantastic images, first for himself, then organizes his speech and communicates with those around him.

Preschool age is characterized by significant changes in children's language skills. Their need to communicate with others, to describe their experiences, leads them to the use of narrative speech. Over the

years, children's speech evolves and becomes more complex in structure and content (Bamberg & Damrad-Frye, 1991; Berman, et al., 1994; Stadler & Ward, 2005; Demir et al., 2015). Children's ability to retell and narrative production improves with age. Recent surveys (Kanellou et al., 2016, p. 52-53) have shown that the performance of young children in retelling is better in comparison to the corresponding free narrative production. The narrative is very important. Apart from the wealth of the vocabulary and the ability to compile (Davies, Shanks & Davies, 2004), narrative speech gives details about child's emotional development, such as humor, irony, insecurity, fear, or joy (McFadden, & Gillam, 1996, p. 48; Bamberg & Damrad-Frye, 1991; Ukrainetz et al., 2005).

The goal of the program "The neighborhoods of Athens in a book", which was carried out within the framework of the Athens Open Schools institution was to give children a stimulus to express themselves and tell a story about their neighborhood. To achieve this goal, an image was used as a stimulus. It is worth noting that the Open Schools institution was created in 2016 and since then offers free creative activities to children due to the economic crisis. In order to stimulate children's interest and communicate better with them, we played verbal games, dramatic plays, while the pictures used were photos from their neighborhood.

Through the dramatic play belonging to the symbolic game category, the child's ability to pretend that an object symbolizes something different from what it actually is cultivated. The dramatic play is used in preschool education to enhance both cognitive and language development through spoken language (Furman, 2000), has played an important role in the children's creative expression and has helped them to tell stories about their neighborhood.

2. Narrative discourse in preschool children

Language is characterized as a complex system because it consists of phonology, vocabulary, semantics, grammar, and pragmatics and as a dynamic system because these parameters interact differently with one another (Conti - Ramsden & Durkin, 2012). Research by Catts, Bridges, Little, & Tomblin (2008) and Storch & Whitehurst (2002) confirms that there is a close link between the linguistic development of preschool children and the reading ability they will demonstrate in elementary school. Narrative skills serve to develop verbal speech (Morrow, Greenspan, & Bower 1987), promote reading ability and contribute to cognitive development (Applebee, 1978; Vygotsky, 1962 cited in Stadler & Ward, 2005, p.73). The narratives of children may be guided or spontaneous, and, in terms of content, may relate to a child's fantastic story or to a personal experience (Curenton & Lucas, 2007). Narration is a complex process that requires a combination of linguistic, cognitive and social skills. Narration includes both the understanding of narrative discourse and its production. Understanding narrative discourse is related to verbal short-term memory, while the production of narrative discourse is directly related to grammatical complexity and focus of attention. The process of production is more difficult and demanding than the process of understanding, as it requires the formation of ideas at the preverbal stage, the formulation of the message through words, articulation and movement as speech production. However, the role of the prerequisite skills for the successful production and understanding of the narrative should be highlighted. Prerequisites include the use of appropriate vocabulary, the correct use of pronouns, the understanding of the temporal

concepts and the cause and effect relationships that link the events of a story. An important role in understanding and telling a story plays the child's ability to perceive situations and understand the feelings of heroes (Stadler & Ward, 2005, p. 78). Also important is the understanding of the language combined with more general knowledge that is required for the creation of a story (Paris & Paris, 2003). The ability of young children to remember a story develops from kindergarten together with memory (Varnhagen, Morrison, & Everall, 1994), while understanding a story relates to the ability to describe a setting and to remember the names of the characters (Isbell et al., 2004). The factors, however, that influence performance in narrative speech are the kind of storytelling, retelling or production of free speech (Hipfner-Boucher et al., 2014; Westerveld & Gillon, 2010), the subject of the story, the child's experiences and the cognitive background of the child. In conclusion, understanding narrative discourse and producing a narrative by a child can provide important information about the child's linguistic competence and cognitive level.

Researchers have been mostly concerned with the global and the local structure of narrative discourse. Global structure refers to the narrator's ability to build a story by referring to some basic elements, such as: who is the main hero, where he or she comes from, what is the time of the story, how the story has started, what is the motivation of the hero, the explicit goal, the efforts to achieve this goal, the obstacles and the outcome (Trabasso & Stein, 1994, cited in Norbury & Bishop, 2003). The local structure focuses on the production of complex propositions, and especially the ability to use relative clauses, a capacity that develops as children grow up (Norbury & Bishop, 2003). Berman & Slobin (1994) studied the development of narrative speech in children and found that at the age of three, the percentage of children who included in their narratives some of the above elements did not exceed 20%. They also found that five-year-olds usually provide information about the initial event, but only about 50% report attempts to solve the problem and only 20% produce complete narratives. Everyday communication is connected with the understanding and production of narrative discourse. Young children listen and are expected to understand the speech of adults (Paris & Paris, 2003) and the stories read or narrated by their parents (Lepola, Lynch, Laakkonen, Silvén, & Niemi, 2012). Adults want children to be able to narrate their own experiences or imaginary stories (Westerveld & Gillon, 2010) and express their thoughts and feelings (Petersen, Gillam, & Gillam, 2008). The development of narrative production capacity should therefore be a key element of the preschool curriculum.

3. The present research

The present study concerns the educational program "The neighborhoods of Athens in a book", as part of the Open Schools institution which took place in a school of the City of Athens in October and November 2017. The Open Schools program is an innovative initiative run by the City of Athens, which has grown popular within the local community since 2016. Schools are open both to the neighborhood and to the society. The school premises turn into meeting places and centres of action where the local community is invited to take part in recreational, cultural, educational and sports activities. This program was implemented with the exclusive donor of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and the coordination of the Athens Partnership. As the Mayor of Athens, Georgios Kaminis, points out "When designing the Open Schools program, we had two main things in mind: the need to convert school buildings into creative

meeting places for the citizens of the local communities as well as the importance of providing a space where one can acquire knowledge, pursue creativity and where innovation and dialogue bloom. [...], we are truly proud to see that the school environment contributes to a more interesting daily life for the citizens of Athens” (Kaminis, *Athens Open Schools*, n.d.). Through the Open Schools program, the City of Athens transforms school buildings into centres of culture and skills development, setting the emphasis on the child, especially on infants and toddlers. The aim is to improve socialization and upgrade the quality of their lives. Maria Iliopoulou, Deputy Mayor for the Child in the Municipality of Athens, notes: “The young citizens of Athens are tomorrow's adults in a city that we want and hope to be more extrovert, more creative and more accessible to innovation in the future. We think this is the best way to create the space and the process that will lead today's children to love the city they grow in, taking into account the needs and the guarantee of a better quality of life” (Iliopoulou, *Athens Open Schools*, n.d.). The actions carried out within this institution were many, various and diverse. The children could participate in any actions they wanted. During the school year 2017/2018, the 25 schools which participated in the Open Schools institution remained open from 4:00 pm to 8:00 pm, after the end of the curricular morning classes. In this range of time, children could choose among various educational programs, all free of charge. The participants were preschool and school age children and their engagement in these actions was voluntary.

The educational program “The neighborhoods of Athens in a book” concerned and was addressed to children aged 4-6. The program was implemented in the last three months of 2017 on the occasion of the proclamation of Athens as the World Book Capital for the year 2018 by UNESCO. This celebration of books, culture and creativity began on April 23rd, 2018 and will last for a whole year. Athens 2018 World Book Capital aims to offer a unique cultural experience to citizens and visitors. Artistic events such as theatre, dancing, cinema, art or video art are inspired by the world of books and are spotted in different parts of the city.

Two educators, a drama teacher and a musician performed the action “The neighborhoods of Athens in a book” in a school in the City of Athens. During the operation of the program there were both security staff and ancillary staff members (cleaners) at school. The action lasted nine weeks (from 2 October to 1 December 2017). The program took place 1 day per week and lasted 2 hours. 25 children, aged 4-6, attended it. Among these children there was a small number of refugee children who did not speak the Greek language fluently. The application forms filled in by the children’s parents showed clearly that many of them were working, and wished to leave their children in a safe place. Other parents would like to offer their children the possibility of creative activity and action, but because of their financial problems they could not. Thus, the Open School institution has been an opportunity for them. The very essence of the program “The neighborhoods of Athens in a book” was to make the children talk about their neighborhood, their experiences and, each one, tell a story that refers to her/his everyday life. To achieve this goal, children were given several stimuli. Through observation, photography, music and improvisation, they set their imagination free and saw their neighborhood in a different way. The actions that have been carried out have followed the principles of modern pedagogy, the utmost goal of which is to link school with society and real life (Dewey, 1982, pp. 33-51). This new experience, the exchange and/or the sharing of points of view made them communicate, collaborate, socialize and have fun. The collaboration among children should

respond to the demands of child-centered education (Klafki, Meyer, & Weber, 1981, pp. 20-25). At the end of this program, the children received a DVD of the stories they narrated.

4. Methodology

The study was conducted to identify and evaluate the direct and possibly indirect perceptions held by children of their neighborhood as they were revealed through the stories the children made up themselves, initiated by a picture related to their neighborhood.

A qualitative case-study method approach was used to facilitate the exploration of the children's subjective personal experiences of their neighborhood setting. A unique feature of this study was the implementation of a range of creative and innovative technologies for the presentation of the pictures, the sound recording and the videotaping. Case-study was selected because it offers an up-close, in depth, and detailed examination of a subject, existing in a specific time and place (Robson, 2002). It provides a real-life context, at real-time situation, regarding children's daily life, during their participation in an educational program at school (Bassey, 1999).

4.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 25 children, girls and boys aged 4-6 years old. They were from Greece, the Balkans and Africa and they came from different social backgrounds. All of them have attended some kind of kindergarten before and they were all familiar with the process of telling stories.

5. Case Study

5.1 Children make their own story

For preschool children, pictures are a means of interpreting the world around them. A picture attracts the child in a unique way. It impresses the child, it excites it and informs it. A picture causes speech. It is a stimulus that will lead the child to create its own stories. The educators of "The neighborhoods of Athens in a book" were based on the power of the picture in order to encourage children to tell their own story. Their purpose was to lead children to free creation so as to approach reality in their own way. To enable the children to create a story about their everyday life in the neighborhood they live, the educators, in this program, followed a process that included screenings of images, games and improvisations. In order for the children to create and tell a story from their neighborhood, they would have to choose an element, turn it into the protagonist in their story, possibly process it in the traditional ways (sketch it, paint it, shape it, etc.) or process it using technology, for example, Photoshop. In the end, their story should be shared and communicated to the other children.

5.2 A first contact with the subject. Playing with the picture

Both characteristic and random sights of the neighborhood were photographed and presented to children. It is noteworthy that this neighborhood, Kypseli, is located in the center of Athens, an area densely populated, without proper urban structure, with limited vegetation, with gridlock, full of apartment

buildings. It is a degraded area due to the great financial crisis. The educators, in order to collect visual material, photographed the children's neighborhoods, buildings, shops, a playground, streets, and views of the school from different angles. They also photographed individual objects such as: clothes on the balcony, a garbage bin, a cradle from the playground, a billboard, a parked car, a balcony with flowers, etc. These photos were shown to the children, but the educators did not tell them which parts of the city they portrayed. Then they let the children comment on the photos and they recorded their answers. Most of the children did not understand that the city views they were seeing came from their own neighborhood. Only few of them (6 out of 25 children) recognized parts of the neighborhoods, such as the playground near the school, some shops, a building with a graffiti on its side. Many children were not particularly enthusiastic about the images they saw and rushed to play with the light of the projector. So a game of light and shadow began in front of the image projected on the wall. This random event gave the opportunity for a new game. The shadows of the children, which became part of the picture, were photographed. The use of randomness is one of the basic techniques for the development of dramatic play. According to Kouretzis, through a random event, an unexpected or a simple incident, a move, a phrase, it is possible to produce a new situation. This gives a stimulus that can take various forms (Kouretzis, 2010, p. 57). Games with light and shadow gave new stimuli to children. They started to show great interest in the photos, began talking about them, communicating and cooperating. Besides, as noted in many researches and studies, play contributes to children's creativity in a decisive way (Dansky, 1980a, 1980b; Kalmar & Kalmar, 1987; Mellou, 1995; Russ, 1998; Baggerly, 1999; Russ & Kaugars, 2001; Howard-Jones, Taylor, & Sutton, 2002; Russ, 2003a, 2003b; Garaigordobil, 2006; Garaigordobil & Berruenco, 2011).

5.3 Story-building: Selecting an item. Verbal games and improvisation

Nicolini states that "We are by nature storytellers; therefore, it only makes sense to allow students a chance to first do something at which they are already good" (Nicolini, 1994, p. 58). Adopting this point of view, the educators of the project started showing the children the pictures of their neighborhood again. The children were asked to choose the photo that impressed them. All the children chose a photo that depicted a large, yellow leaf that lay on the sidewalk outside their school.

This choice may be due to the fact that all children followed the opinion of the first one. Perhaps it was incidental. The element that the children had to rely on to create their story was a yellow leaf fallen on the sidewalk outside the school. Then the children began improvising and expressing ideas and impressions about the image they had chosen. Improvisation does not necessarily mean momentarily activity or an action without organization and planning. Improvisation gave the children the opportunity to discover new experiences to play and communicate with others (Kouretzis, 2010, p. 56). In this case nothing happened randomly. The goal was specific: children should tell a story about their neighborhood using only one element they chose. In order to be able to achieve the goal, appropriate conditions had to be created so that children's narratives could get an integrated form of content, structure, and expressive means. An important role in the process had the use of various verbal games the children played by trying to give a name to this leaf, to give it identity and destination (Rodari, 1993).

5.4 Storytelling

The improvisations and verbal games led the children to tell a story. Each child made his/her own version of the leaf. The teachers recorded the children's stories. Initially, the children asked questions about the leaf: "What is its name?" (Louise, 4 years old), "Where does it come from?" (Anne, 4 years old), "Where does it go?" (Samuel, 5 years old), "Has it got any friends?" (Aphrodite, 4 years old), "Does it want to tell us something?" (Andreas, 4 years old), "Is it hungry?" (Iris, 4 years old), "Is it thirsty?" (Leonidas, 4 years old), "Is it hiding?" (Maria, 4 years old), "Does it want to play?" (Myrto, 4 years old), "How did it get here?" (Paul, 5 years old), "The wind brought it" (Nadine, 6 years old). It is worth noting that from the beginning the children regarded the leaf as a person with his/her own story. Then the rest of the children began to answer these initial questions, each one giving a new dimension in the story of this leaf: "This leaf lived on a plane tree and was very happy. But a strong wind brought it here near our school" (Nikolas, 6 years old).

"This leaf knows all our secrets, but it does not speak. It is waiting to play" (Eudoxia, 6 years old).

"This leaf was found in a house. But there was a goat that wanted to eat it. So it left and came here" (Milena, 5 years old).

"I think the leaf is here because it likes school and wants to play with us during breaks" (Harris, 5 years old).

"This leaf knows everything. The only thing it does not know is when the bell for the break will ring" (Luca, 5 years old).

"This leaf wants to go and live in a park full of dogs" (Alexandros, 5 years old).

"I want to take it with me, gather other leaves and make a collection of autumn leaves" (Oddie, 5 years old).

"The leaf is yellow because it was painted by a painter. It's the painter's brush. With this paintbrush, the painter can paint our entire school with many colors" (Myrto, 4 years old).

"The leaf wants to fly high and we want to run behind it and catch it" (Yannis, 4 years old).

"This leaf travels around the world because it wants to make friends" (James, 4).

"But now it will stay with us. We will never lose it" (Vassilis, 5 years old).

"This leaf is mine. I also have many more leaves in a box. They have many colors. That was the only one that was yellow" (Athena, 4 years old).

"It's not a leaf. It's a wooden ladle" (Koralia, 4 years old).

"Yes. And it stirs the pot with the soup. But it does not want to stay there. It wants to go to the refrigerator. But it can't" (Crystallia, 4 years old).

5.5 Illustration and presentation of the story

After the recording of the stories told by the children, educators and children listened to them. The children were surprised to hear their voices. Then the educators re-exposed the photo with the leaf as well as all the photos they had taken with the shadows created by the bodies of the children on the projection of the photos. The educators asked the children if they wanted to play another game. They agreed and then the educators began to change, through Photoshop, the colors in the photos they projected. The children

were thrilled to see the images change and asked to do the same thing. Now it was the children's turn to play with the computer. This process presented some difficulties, as there was only one computer and all the children were eager to play. The children that were not on the computer sang with the educator and recorded songs about their city. Then the children chose the photos they liked. After that they began to illustrate their story. By changing the colors of the leaf and learning to add or remove elements from the image, they began to create using the computer. This creative process led the children to produce their own works of art. Moreover, artistic activities are an important factor in the pedagogical process, as they contribute to both self-expression and the ability to handle tools and materials, to think symbolically, make connections among contexts, see multiple perspectives and solve problems (Winner, 1982; Schirmacher, 1986; McWhinnie, 1992; Davis & Gardner, 1993; Isenberg & Jalongo, 1993; Lasky & Mukerji-Bergeson, 1993; Bruner, 1996; Zimmerman, E., & Zimmerman, L., 2000; Epstein, 2001; Schirmacher, 2002; Eisner, 2003; Mayesky, 2003; Gandini, Hill, Cadwell & Schwall, 2005). Dewey, in *Art as Experience*, argued that art illuminates common human experience and that every citizen deserves the right to aesthetic experience (Dewey, 1934). The role played by art in preschool children in the pedagogical programs of Reggio Emilia is also well known. In the present case study, through experimentation with the computer, the children gave new dimensions to the leaf, the protagonist of their story. The book which has been created was a different book. It was basically a video, with images resulted by photographs from the neighborhood and the shadows of the children on them as well as pictures from the leaf the children had chosen. The children's recorded voices telling the story of this leaf were heard in this video. The video was given the title "The leaf had its own story" and every child got a DVD at the end of the program. The children listening to the stories they narrated were enthusiastic and were asking to see the video again. On the last day the educators invited the parents to see the video together with the children. The parents were enthusiastic and moved when listening to their children's voice and asked how this program has been implemented. They listened to their children's stories and they appreciated the cooperation among the children. Researchers have come to the conclusion that literacy instruction is most effective when developed through social interaction and collaboration with others (Dugan, 1997). This pedagogical strategy focuses on children's desire to talk and interact with each other (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008, p. 37).

6. Observation Outcomes/Evaluation

It should be noted that the program "The neighborhoods of Athens in a book" took place in the afternoon. The children came after kindergarten, they were tired and it was relatively difficult to attend another training program. For this reason, this action had mainly a recreational nature. As educators we were especially concerned to see how 25 children of different backgrounds and ages could collaborate, make up a story and create a book. More over it is important to notice that children didn't know each other neither have they ever met the educators before. At first, it was rather disappointed that the children didn't seem to be interested in the pictures of their neighborhood. However, the children's play with shadows seemed to bring them together. Their involvement could enable them to develop closer relationships with others, feel more comfortable, be part of the pictures and work in a group. In addition, new technologies and the visual methods of data gathering, such as videotaping, tape recording, Photoshop, etc, provided a

range of ways for young children to explore their environment and to contribute to it (Prosser, 2007). The children's own photographs of their shadows could make them feel part of their neighborhood.

The present study illustrated that children are able to construct simple stories drawing upon both pictures and personal experiences. Even very young children who don't speak fluently can invent and tell stories orally, if they have the opportunity. Also, the children's consideration of the leaf as a person enabled them to express inner feelings, thoughts and needs (i.e. the leaf wants to make friends, it is happy, it likes school, it wants to play, etc). Furthermore, the visual language of photographs seemed to provide a "safe place" where children feel free to express themselves.

7. Study limitations and suggestions for further research

The number of children participating in this program (25 children) was quite small to enable us to form general conclusions. The nature of this program, mainly recreational and not educational, has also played an important role. Therefore, we cannot draw safe conclusions about preschool children's ability to tell a story about their everyday life. Another element limiting the generalization of the conclusions has been the time factor: there was not enough time for the children either to get to know each other better or their educators. This action took place only once a week for two hours.

It would certainly be more fruitful to continue a similar research on preschool children's storytelling based on a single element, at the kindergarten. These premises are more familiar to children and there is enough time for observation. It would also be important to include in the evaluation forms, filled in by the parents, some questions about their children's impressions at the end of the program, and which part of the process they liked most.

8. Conclusions

The program took place in one of the degraded areas of Athens, a densely populated area with high unemployment rates. In the recent years a large proportion of its inhabitants are immigrants. Although the children's parents, who were immigrants, do not speak Greek well, their children, born in Greece, speak the Greek language fluently. Six children of immigrants who came to Greece recently, took part in this program. From the participation forms filled in by both Greek and foreigner parents, it was noted that in most cases they work occasionally, without specific working hours. As they said, they were looking for activities that could engage their children creatively without spending money. All children participating in this program come from a low socio-economic environment.

The program "The neighborhoods of Athens in a book" was based mainly on entertainment. The children, through play and improvisations, came into contact with new technologies, narrated and illustrated their own story. In their storytelling, they used the simple, direct narration to convey information. The protagonist of their story, the leaf of a plane tree, in this case, has been portrayed as a man, as a friend of theirs. Their questions are characteristic: "What is its name?", "Does it hurt?", "Is it thirsty?", "Has it got any friends?", "Does it want to tell us something?" In this way they expressed their anxieties, their fears and their insecurities. Other children considered this leaf as a companion in their school, while many were

the ones who set it in a fantastic place. Pictures have been an important stimulus in children's narration. Although there have been some doubts about the adequacy of only one element for the storytelling, it turned out that the children's imagination worked and, through play and technology, the children were able to express, create and have fun.

9. Ethical considerations

The ethical implications involved in working with young children have been very important. A special written permit was given by parents for their children's participation in the program, while the children were asked if they wanted to participate in the activities. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured by removing children's identifying details.

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