

A Letter, A Vignette, Papatheodoulou and Rodari Initiate A Vendetta

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Abstract: Reading literature should first and foremost instill pleasure in an individual, a challenge that requires the active involvement of the student in the unfolding of the narrative. Considering that the nature of a child co-exists with the notion of play, a program was developed centered around a fictional story and three postal letters. It is with these three letters that our role-playing through reading activity commences. “A wandering letter, a vignette, Papatheodoulou and Rodari initiate a vendetta” is a local reading program integrated within a broader network of cultural themes that took place in the prefecture of Xanthi and was based on three pivotal aspects.

Key words: pleasure, active participation, play

1. Introduction

During the school year 2017–2018, a program was developed and took place in the Elementary school sector of the Prefecture of Xanthi. It was part of a broader network of cultural themes and specifically branched out from the Reading Program entitled: “A letter, a vignette, Papatheodoulou and Rodari initiate a vendetta”.

Twenty-one schools from the Prefecture of Xanthi participated in the project: 6 kindergartens and 15 elementary schools (of which 3 were Greek-Turkish bilingual minority schools, 1 special needs school, the school for the deaf and hearing impaired and the school for the blind and vision impaired). The thematic network commenced in December 2017 under the initiative of the prefectural Department of Education Office in Xanthi, in conjunction with the coordinator of culturally significant school programs and ended at the start of June 2018. Important collaborators in the project were: The Municipality of Xanthi (Cultural Sector), the author Antonis Papatheodoulou, the illustrator Iris Samartzi, Papadopoulos Publications (representing them was Maria Gerosideri), the author Dimitra Pyrgeli, the social organization Oxygen and various local authorities.

2. Plus 1 Keywords for a Creative Program in Reading

The aim of reading literature is for young students to familiarize themselves with the book itself, the process of actually reading and the gradual consolidation of a friendship between the young reader and the literary text (Ekebi, 2012). This familiarization requires the development of motives in order to enchant the reader into the world of books and, in turn, to enable them to love the entire process. Ada Katsiki-Givalou (2008) notes that “the text, the book in general, must intrigue the reader-student so as to establish a dialogue between the two, to create a curiosity about the characters and the unfolding plot” (Κατσίκη Γκίβαλου, 2008).

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The first keyword then is the word that will gain the attention of the reader and is, of course, none other than the word “pleasure”. Considering that “the element of enjoyment — which goes hand in hand with reading a literary text- is the attracting feature that will allure the recipient into the world of books” (Κατσίκη Γκίβαλου, 2008), the pleasure of reading is derived from the involvement of the reader with the unravelling events of the narrative (Καλογήρου & Λαλαγιάννη 2005). In fact, modern literary theories tend to support the above notion, emphasizing the role of the reader and the process of interpreting and interacting with a text. With this in mind, a teacher may be able to exploit this literary trail of discovery “by involving the student in this game of reading literature, thereby transforming the indifferent consumer of a text into an active and critical product” (Κατσίκη Γκίβαλου, 2005). The active participation of the reader then, constitutes the second keyword of a literature program.

The cultivation of reading becomes possible when the relationship between the reader and the literary text are based on joy and pleasure, just as in playing a game (Αγγελοπούλου, 1994). This brings us to the third keyword. Playing and reading appear to have a strong affiliation and for this reason, the concept of play can be viewed as being the most significant of all three keywords in reading literature. In particular, the idea of “play” is so empowering in that it functions in unison with the previously mentioned notions of pleasure and actively engaged participants. Katsiki-Givalou has identified the common traits between literature and play: 1) Both constitute an activity within themselves. 2) They enchant and engage the child. 3) They aesthetically brighten the child’s world without satisfying materialistic demands as they contain an element of unselfishness. 4) They promote harmony. (Κατσίκη- Γκίβαλου, 1997). To tie all this together, Christian Poslaniec (1992) refers to a quote by Jean Perrot which states that: “successful reading ... is the creative energy emerging from the connection between play and imagination” (Ποσλιανέκ, 1992).

To this end, reading — just as playing — is simultaneously an individual and social situation. In the first instance, the reader isolates him-herself and reads on their own, at their own pace and interacts with the text. In the second sense, communicating with a text is multifaceted as it incorporates the individualized reader-text relation with a group of fellow-readers. At this point, the school is called on to cultivate the relation between the reader, the text and its fellow-readers through the adoption of various literary activities. It is essential however, to continue fostering and promoting personalized reading too (Αναγνωστοπούλου, 2002).

What does promoting reading as a teacher mean? “Promoting reading in class means thinking together with my students about the multiple relations I can have with the texts. It means I reenact with them literary adventures, present functionally different texts to students, brainstorm educational tools, pedagogical practices and activities that can inform students, as well as help them in their imaginative and creative capacities” (Αναγνωστοπούλου, 2002).

It can be said that reading books possesses the rules of play of a game and that these “literary adventures” of a reading program inevitably take on the same characteristics of a game and function on a similar level. “The traditional sequence of activities in a class which seeks to address themes relating to the promotion of reading skills and literary interests begins with a carefully planned series of games” (Σπινκ, 1990). The essential element of programming is the creation of scenarios of educational games which comprise of the planning of specific ‘storylines’. This involves the actual plot of the game and gives children the protagonist role, so that they participate in the activities that have been planned, wherein they adopt roles of responsibility and decision-making (Γερμανός, 2004).

3. Thematic Networking: The Functional Framework

The Reading Program took place within the framework of a local thematic network of cultural happenings. The inauguration of this thematic network commenced in 2005, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. It initially addressed areas relating to Environmental Studies, and in 2006 extended its scope to incorporate programs relating to health and fitness issues.

By the school year 2014–2015, a ministerial decision relating to the planning and implementation of programs which drew on school activities was published, specifically entitled:

2.3.3 Actions of Cultural Themes

- Culturally Relevant Thematic Programs
- Local Thematic Networks of Cultural Themes

Within the context of a particular cultural program, a team of educators can collaborate with prefectural departments or the local government, universities, research centers, government or non-government bodies, internet communication providers, small research fields, interviews or any other means considered of worth to contribute to the success of a program. Under the responsibility of the Coordinator of Cultural Themes or School Programs, and later under the authority of the Department of Careers Counselling, the formation of local networks of cultural programs may be developed” (Υπουργείο Παιδείας και Θρησκευμάτων, 2014).

The aim of the establishment of a thematic network, as it is described in the ministerial decisions for the themes relating to Environmental Studies, and Health Studies is to: “...offer the possibility to create and maintain a communicative framework between students and teachers from various geographical areas and social bodies or offices” (Υπουργείο Παιδείας και Θρησκευμάτων, 2014).

4. The Program

The primary outcome of the program is the cultivation of reading books and specifically:

- The chase between delight and pleasure for students.
- The love of and immersion in literature books.
- The development of imagination and the liberation of its creative power via all means of art.
- The cultivation of critical thought and the sensitization towards contemporary sociopolitical issues.
- The promotion of group work through a network of book reading, whilst implementing a holistic approach to learning.

The main pursuit of the Network was to explore the children’s books of two authors via a spectrum of creative multi-faceted artistic and interdisciplinary activities based on a common framework of storytelling. The works of the given authors are characterized by their use of imagination, original techniques and innovative topics relating to modern literary approaches. To be more specific, the authors are Gianni Rodari, an acclaimed Italian author, educator and journalist who, many years ago, opened new cutting edge avenues in the area of children’s literature (Αφεντουλίδου, 2015), and Antonis Papatheodoulou, a contemporary, award-winning author who always manages to leave his mark in the pioneering sphere.

The Network endeavored to use the works of the abovementioned authors and cultivate, first and foremost a love for reading. In other words, it aimed to establish intrinsic motives for reading that would emanate from the pure pleasure of books, but also from the collaboration between students with the actual themes of the books and

the association with their experiences within their broader sociopolitical backdrop in the community they are a part of.

5. Form and Methodology of The Network Program

As was previously addressed, a major role to be played in the design of such a program is the scenario of educational games, particularly the manner within which they are presented, as this is what awakens the curiosity and interest of the child so as to actively engage in the activities. The element of surprise adds to and completes the overall execution of the program through a storytelling framework. To be more specific, the student is called upon to be placed in a role and to participate in a reading adventure, proposing possible solutions so as to continue the story.

“A lost letter from Mr. Kosta’s postman’s bag! (A Last Letter, Antonis Papatheodoulou). Where did it go? What happened? Maybe it made a run for it together with Rodari’s Nose? (Tales from the Telephone — The Runaway Nose, Gianni Rodari) Where is it heading? A vendetta breaks out and a storytelling battle between Papatheodoulou and Rodari starts to rage.” The story, more or less, began like this and ended up in the schools which took part in the program relating to the three letters from the post office and the vignette which Rodari and Papatheodoulou depict. Each letter prompted the children to discover where the Nose had run off to in Rodari’s story together with the letter that escaped from Papatheodoulou’s tale. Both had hidden themselves within the books and the children were always informed by the sender of the letters, the Injured Ink, as to the whereabouts of their texts.

The first two letters were handed out to the teachers at scheduled seminars and workshops which provided details on the organization of the program. Each school then, chose the books of the authors they wanted to work with and went on to develop various activities — always in keeping with the initial search for the wandering protagonists, Letter and Nose! Following the instructions of the letters and through a multitude of cross-thematic activities, the students took on the role of the pacifists between the two authors and the rescuers of the Letter and the Nose, with the ultimate aim to put an end to this war of tales.

In each book, various thematic aspects were touched on, as well as the surfacing concerns which resulted from these issues. Following on from this, an assessment of the multimodal and peritextual features of the storybooks took place and provided a stimulus to deepen the literary interpretations of the texts through numerous interdisciplinary and artistic adaptations and extensions to the activities.

The methodological scope suggested was a combination of research, collaborative, actively-participating approaches, in unison with experiential learning techniques. The Project Method was considered most appropriate as it can entail all 3 phases of reading and is implemented through experiential learning techniques (that is, role play, theatrical play, art and design, cross-artistic approaches and so on).

Specifically, in the first phase (in all schools participating in the program) both books were narrated to the students (One Last Letter and The Runaway Nose) and various introductory reading activities ensued.

In the second phase of reading, wherein the second letter had now arrived, each class approached the book or books of the authors they had chosen via a multidisciplinary or cross-artistic approach (theatrical performance, artistic creation, creative writing, musical-kinesthetic games, interdisciplinary approaches, use of new technologies using the stories selected). During this phase, students also borrowed books by the same authors (and other writers) from lending libraries to read at home.

The third phase of reading entailed a presentation of all that had been undertaken and productively put together. In this phase, the program came to an end for the school year and the third letter was never sent to the schools, as with the previous two letters. Instead, the schools were invited to the Cultural Center of Xanthi, which was converted to an Interactive Reading Museum for 3 days. All areas of the Cultural Center functioned as workshop stations (theatrical, artistic, musical, storytelling). In these workshops, a small narration of a poem or piece of prose from our two authors gave impetus to both specialist teachers and students to engage in a cross-artistic interactive approach to the text, always with the intention to find the two lost heroes. The schools visited the workshops on a rotating basis in hope of finding the wandering characters. At the end, all the participating students would gather in one of the areas of the Cultural Center wherein, apart from the presentations of the activities completed by each school, there was a live online connection with the author Antonis Papatheodoulou. It is here that the third letter was read and the mystery was finally solved. The two roaming heroes, after their long wanderings in the books and the children's artistic creations, decided to become ...bookmarks! In this way, they could be present in all storybooks students read. The bookmark — which depicted the two characters in the company of a good book, enjoying their vacation, was designed by the illustrator Iris Samartzi. To finish off the program, Papadopoulos Publications extended the courtesy of donating books to all the participating schools to contribute to their school libraries.

It should be noted that for the minority schools in the mountainous regions who did not have access to any means of transport, a mobile Interactive Reading Museum was organized for them and the program took place at the Elementary School of Pachni. Moreover, in association with the Youth Festival of Xanthi, the artistic works designed for the program were displayed at the Municipal Art Gallery of Xanthi.

6. Evaluation of The Program

The success of a program is based on its initial goals. In the case of the given Program, what is to be evaluated is the challenge to delight and please students with their overall participation in the activities and creative production of works. Apart from noting this delight and pleasure, together with the enthusiasm and active participation of the students involved, numerous exceptional works resulted from this sociocultural amalgamation. Some indicative examples include: a Braille version of Papatheodoulou's book "The Last Letter", a performance in sign language of Foivos Delivoria's song "There once was a City", the composition of an original song about the two wandering heroes which was recorded by the Municipal Radio Station of Xanthi (sung by the students themselves), as well as theatrical performances, events, artwork displays and literary compositions.

Special reference needs to be made to the interaction and cooperation that emerged amongst all schools involved in the Program (kindergartens, bilingual minority schools, public schools, special needs schools).

Needless to say, being a reading program, one must assess whether students managed to go in search of literature as a means of free-time activity. It was apparent throughout the duration of the Program that this aim was achieved. Of course, it should be pointed out that the effects of such a program should not only seek short term results, but also long term ones. Unfortunately, in the current scope of this Program, such results could not be detected. One must bear in mind, however, that the ultimate intention of such a cultural endeavor is to lay the foundations for critical, lifelong readers.

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