

Road Takes, Road Leaves ... “Refugee Roads” Training Program

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Abstract: In order to raise the awareness of toddlers towards refugees, we design and implement an educational program that focuses on a literary person familiar to our class, who was mentioned by the children themselves in their effort to contribute to the understanding of the concept of “refugee”. Characteristics of our educational program are its playful character, the universal participation of toddlers in it and the expression of the creative thinking of toddlers. Based on the teaching principle of declining guidance, students narrate episodes they create with their imagination about the adventure of refuge of this particular literary hero that they believe it begins when their garden is destroyed.

Key words: refuge, literary hero, creativity

1. Introduction

The quality of literature to evoke experiences is responsible for the invention of this program. More specifically, in our class we tried to define the concept of “refugee” in the context of a relaxed discussion with the children in order to raise their awareness about the presence of refugees in our area, their development of friendly feelings and attitudes towards our fellow refugees. Pointing out that these people are being forced to leave their place of residence because it has been destroyed and while we were looking for relevant real-life stimuli for our students, news bulletins and so on, one schoolgirl remarked enthusiastically: “Like the Little Girl who left her garden that was destroyed.”

The specific person that the student spoke about is the heroine of a favorite literary text among toddlers of our class. Although the heroine with the term “refugee” was not described anywhere in this text, we considered that her example was ideal for explaining the concept. Thanks to the association of the refugees with a literary person already familiar to the toddlers, the refugees had now acquired an entity in the perception of all our students, they had become real, familiar, friendly persons.

As the title of our educational program, we chose the stereotypical phrase of the fairy tales “Road takes, road leaves...” in order to highlight the dimension of the adventure that the refugee recommends and on the other hand to give the program the “magic” element beloved to children.

2. Identity of the Program

Our educational action for the school year 2016–2017 took place exclusively in the context of the optional program of the Nursery School that develops from one p.m. until four p.m. in a public nursery school of West Attica.

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The participating students are fifteen, of which ten are girls, three are preschoolers, one does not know the Greek language well and one graduates because he has a serious articulation problem.

3. Objectives

- Familiarization of toddlers with the refugee phenomenon and their awareness in the refugee struggle for a better life.
- Positioning each toddler at the center of the group of classmates and consequently promoting contact and communication between all toddlers.
- Awareness of literary works and heroes as reference points and consequently development of a philanthropic attitude by the toddlers.
- Verbal development and especially cultivation of the narrative ability.
- Cultivation of students’ creative thinking.
- Understanding the connection between the oral and written speech to represent the spoken world.

4. Principles and Methodology

Reacting flexibly, stimulating the student's report, we designed and implemented this curriculum, which focuses the class interest on the refugee survival struggle, utilizing a narrative character. Thus, the enormous pedagogical power of literature, since it transmits to us experiences (Iser, 1990, pp. 104, 281) through our identification with literary heroes (Booth, 1987, pp. 278–281, 378), becomes in our case the starting point for the initiation of toddlers into the refugee phenomenon. For the specific literary person on whom we focused our program, there is nowhere in the relevant literary book (Ilia E., 2012) a designation of ethnicity or race, nor is it even referred to by any name other than “Little Girl”. This certainly gives the impression that anyone could be a refugee, provided that conditions and circumstances are met.

The use of this narrative person for the consolidation of the concept of “refugee” and the acquaintance of toddlers with the corresponding social phenomenon of our time also shows the advantage that this person was not created for this purpose. It pre-existed and simply the modern reality, the conjuncture we are experiencing, dictated the corresponding way of seeing it. Consequently, concepts and impressions regarding refuge arise effortlessly, of course.

The narrative point of the relevant work in which the search for another place becomes the only way out and perspective for the Little Girl-heroine, is the starting point of the narration of the students, who are asked to be placed in a series of questions common to all. Each question corresponds to a chapter in their story about the refugee course of the little heroine. In other words, the narration of toddlers is a continuation of the literary text in a specific direction that the toddlers themselves led it.

As the dominant element of childhood is the need and the mood for play (Huizinga, 1989, pp. 20–28), we take care to give our educational program a playful dimension (Poslaniek, 1992, p. 18). So, the toddlers before taking the floor to answer any question, they turn either to the right or to the left the globe located in the center of the circle where they sit. This represents the path that the Little Girl will travel until she ends up in a place that will become her new homeland.

Aiming with the specific educational program and the cultivation of creative thinking and expression of all students with a focus on the issue of refuge, the children produce the original narrative texts, sometimes in groups and sometimes individually. The creation of texts is based on the principle of declining guidance applied to text-centered teaching models. In particular, the process by which children's texts emerge is that of questions and answers. The teacher, who is a very attentive listener, asks questions, usually clarifying, in relation to the previous answers he has received. It goes without saying that as toddlers' answers become more complete and clearer, the number of supplementary questions asked is limited.

Students' narrative texts are recorded in traditional or modern ways, such as writing on paper, writing on a computer, recording, videotaping, etc. for a variety of uses. Among the ways of utilization, we mention the theatrical performance of children's texts or their publication on the school blog. This utilization works for students as an additional motivation for creative expression.

Here are some of our most common questions to all toddlers, in which we recorded their responses: What does the Little Girl have with her on the refugee trip?/How does she travel?/Where would she like to go?/How does she dream of the place she will leave?/Who are her companions on the streets of refuge?/Travel experiences/ Impressions from the new life/Feelings about the old and the new life.

5. Results

The following are completely indicative of three toddlers' narratives: a) about how the Little Girl dreams of the place she will live, b) about her experiences from the streets of refuge and c) about her impressions and feelings about her old and new life.

a.1) The Little Girl dreams of making another garden that is much bigger than the old one. She wants to have a horse, a cow, butterflies, cats and a dog. The Little Girl dreams of taking care of her animals with the Little Prince. She wishes the two of them live in a place where there are no other people and take walks together in the playground.

a.2) The Little Girl dreams of making a little flower garden in the house of the Little Prince so that the Little Prince can feel happy. The snow will fall all night but every morning when they wake up, the sun will have melted the snow.

b.1) The Little Girl saw one night on her way a red dragon, whose mouth fire was coming out. The dragon set fire to a house that started burning. The family inside alerted the Fire Department, which arrived quickly. They managed to extinguish the fire before the whole house burned down. This dragon had wings. It started flying high and throwing stones at people's houses. The Little Girl saw the people doing chores to fix the dragon's destruction and went into the houses and helped. In one house she told the little child and his parents: "Your house looks nice". And then they told her that she could stay with them. When the sun came up, the police chased the dragon but it escaped. The Little Girl remembered a friend of hers, who knew a lot about dragons. She had learned from him that when a dragon rules the city, it is because it wants to eat. She told the family and mum made soup for the dragon. Since then, every time the dragon was hungry, it went and ate in the house where the Little Girl lived. So, it did not hurt people again.

b.2) The Little Girl had seen a house that had the shape of a rose. The carpenters had made it this way for a girl who liked flowers. The house smelled like a rose because the girl who lived there sprayed it with her own rose perfume. When the Little Girl walked outside, she saw that the door was open and entered. The girl who owned this home, whenever she was away, left the door open for anyone who likes flowers to enter. When the Little Girl came

in, she saw that flowers were painted on the walls. The Little Girl lay on the bed to rest. Then, she ate two yoghurts she found in the fridge and a whole pineapple she saw on the table, and continued the journey.

b.3) The Little Girl along with other little refugees arrive in a forest to relax and cut fruit. There, they saw an amazing house. They made a wish for the door to open and it opened immediately. They realized that the house was magical. They saw a fountain in the garden changing colors and found paintings for the children to paint there. They wished to stay in this house and have lots of books and toys, and that wish came true. The last wish made by the Little Girl was for all the children to have many pairs of shoes, one for winter, another for spring, another for summer and another for autumn.

c.1) The Little Girl likes her new homeland, which is England. Her cousin has also gone there and they are hanging out. She has dolls that talk, they say what the Little Girl tells them. In England, the Little Girl finds telescopes to look at the planets. She also buys antiques to decorate her house. She cannot find one pink and white flower, though, which they had in their homeland. Whenever the Little Girl remembers her mother who was killed, she cries. But because she arranges to go out, she quickly stops crying to get ready.

c.2) The Little Girl is in Greece. She goes to a shop that has a beautiful doll and they play "family" with a little boy. They have the doll for their baby. The Little Girl has lost her family when her house was destroyed. On the day the Little Girl has her birthday, the boy who plays together in the shop takes money from his dad and gives the Little Girl the doll as a gift. Whenever the Little Girl remembers her old life, she feels sad. She then thinks of her friend and feels happy.

c.3) The Little Girl is happy because she can play with the flowers "he loves me — he doesn't love me" for her old garden and then throw the flowers high to fall on her. She looks out of the window at the children in the square and greets them. So, she has made five friends. She plays with them when she finds their games easy. In difficult games, such as "play tag", she does not play because she is afraid of being hit. An easy game is when they play "family" or when they play the Sun, the Earth, and other planets. The Little Girl is wearing embroidered clothes with threads that have the colors of earth. So, the other kids always ask the Little Girl to play the role of the Earth.

6. Conclusions

The children became aware of the issue of refugees as they identified themselves with a literary person close to them, who they considered to be experiencing the refugee problem. As part of the program, they focused on the inner world of refugees, as they reflected on and presented the dreams and expectations of a refugee child for his new life, his memories of his life before the refugee period and his feelings for all this adventure.

The literary text having been wonderfully assimilated, as evidenced by its use by the toddlers themselves to understand the concept of refuge, functioned as an experience and offered an ideal stimulus to the children's imagination for the development of history. The children's enthusiasm for participating in the educational program remained undiminished. The successive narratives of each child show its narrative development.

It is just as easy to conclude that toddlers' imagination is inexhaustible. Each narrative with the same question/theme is different, original, unrepeatable. Whenever a toddler-narrator makes reference to elements of a classmate's previous narrative, these elements are at the same time used wonderfully.

The ability to listen and communicate was fully developed for all toddlers, as evidenced by the relationship of the narratives to the subject, the variety of toddler narrative versions, and the creative use of classmates' participation in the narrative process.

The specific program can be carried out with students of nursery school as well as with students of all grades of Elementary and High School, with the sole condition of utilizing a suitable stimulus, literary or other work of art (e.g., Painting, song, etc.), which stimulus will arise effortlessly.

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