

Raising the Awareness of Toddlers for Refugees, Through the Educational Program “We Live on a Planet”

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Abstract: This educational program aims to raise the awareness of toddlers on the issue of refugees, seeks to cultivate a positive attitude towards them, regardless of country of origin, time, historical era. To make this possible, the earth is presented in relation to the universe, so that toddlers may perceive it as the common home of all people, to feel its inhabitants as their roommates. In order for toddlers to understand the vastness of the universe more effectively, the work of Exupery “The Little Prince” is utilized, where the narrative refers to the life of the hero on his planet and his journey to Earth, through a path that includes six more planets. Toddlers then create narrative texts on the subject of interaction with their fellow human beings. These narratives are dominated by the friendly mood and the attitudes of understanding and solidarity towards the refugees, in full harmonization with the goals of the program.

Key words: refugees, educational program, literature, narratives

1. Introduction

At first, a relaxed discussion is attempted in the classroom, with the main goal of raising the perceptions of toddlers about coexistence with refugees and also raising their awareness regarding the presence of refugees in the area where the toddlers live. Then, in order for the toddlers to develop friendly feelings and attitudes towards the refugees of our time, the aim is to present the Earth as the common home of all people. The view that the discussion concludes is that if we are called to live together on the same planet, it is preferable to choose harmonious coexistence and mutual aid.

To convey the concept of cohabitation, the earth is presented in relation to the universe. For this particular pedagogical intervention, the eloquent title “We live on a planet” is chosen, which highlights the increased possibility of coexistence of people of different races and cultures from many parts of the world. The choice of the title helps everyone feel close to everyone else.

2. Application Elements

The specific educational program, which was attended by 13 toddlers and 3 preschoolers, took place in a public Nursery School in Attica in 2017 and was completed within 3 months.

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2.1 Objectives

The main goal is to familiarize toddlers with the refugee phenomenon and raise their awareness of the refugee struggle for a better life.

The present pedagogical intervention also aims at the socialization of toddlers both through their active participation in the program and through the communication of the school class with its wider social environment, in particular the involvement and reflection of toddlers in relation to the modern and diachronic phenomenon of asylum.

Additional goals are the cultivation of the creative thinking of toddlers, the verbal development and in particular the cultivation of their narrative ability, their understanding of the connection between the spoken and the written speech, the quality of the written speech to represent the spoken and finally their familiarity with the literary text.

3. The Initiation of Toddlers Into the Concept of the Universe Through the Use of Literature

Literature is inextricably linked to human creativity (Kotopoulos, 2012). During the literary reading, complex perpetual processes are performed, which cause the impression of personal involvement in the narrative world, the experience of situations and emotions that are attributed to the text (Iser, 1990), through our identification with the heroes (Booth, 1987). The result of the creative role of the reader is pleasure, aesthetic pleasure, emotional charge and in these lies the pedagogical power of the literary works. Although the reader approaches them with a basic motivation to enjoy them, at the same time he benefits in many ways; he gets educated, his personality is formed, he acquires knowledge, he develops mentally, verbally, he matures emotionally, and he gradually conquers self-knowledge. The irreplaceable pedagogical power of literary works is known and tested since antiquity with the dominant form of tragedy of that time (Tompkins, 1988). By consciously utilizing literature in the school context, the goal of their successful education in the modern school could be ensured for all students.

In particular, in the context of this pedagogical intervention, the students of the Nursery School are offered a very remarkable literary work, “The Little Prince” by the French author Antoine de Saint-Exupery. The work describes the adventures of the main literary hero of the same name, both on his own planet and on the other six planets he visits, before arriving on Earth to meet friends. Thus, by teaching the literary work to toddlers, in addition to promoting literacy and their general education, the best way to serve the specific goal of transmitting specific knowledge and information about the universe is achieved. Planet Earth is contrasted with various other planets, presented and determined in relation to the vastness of the universe. This makes it easier for toddlers to perceive the whole earth as the common place, the common home of all people, to perceive all its inhabitants as roommates.

4. Methodology of Pedagogical Intervention

As the dominant element of childhood is the need and disposition for play (Huizinga, 1989), the literary text used in the curriculum is combined with playful activities (Poslaniek, 1992), so that all toddlers participate with enthusiasm. Hula hoop wreaths scattered throughout the classroom represent the various planets, and a scarf is scattered to each wreath to reveal the Little Prince’s movement from planet to planet. The scarf ends up between the pupils sitting in a circle forming the planet earth.

The program focuses on the creation by children of their own original individual or group narrative texts (Huck, Hepler and Hickman, 1979), on the subject of their interaction with refugees. The children’s texts arise from questions asked by the teacher, as a very attentive listener (Pascucci & Rossi, 2002). Whenever there are contradictions or inaccuracies in the children’s answers, the teacher asks clarifying questions that refer to the narrative characters, their relationships, their feelings, the place and time of the action. It is the process of declining guidance found in text-centered teaching models (Matsagouras, 2001).

Toddlers’ narratives are performed sequentially in the order determined by the luck factor and accurately recorded by the teacher with traditional methods, such as writing on paper, or with modern ones, such as computer writing, recording and videotaping. After the completion of each text, it is read immediately to toddlers so that they have the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the recording of their own stories, as well as those of their classmates, so they are introduced to creative writing and realize the quality of written language to capture thought.

Children’s narrative texts are used in a variety of ways. Utilization can take the form of a publication or a school play, which usually contributes to the opening of the school to the wider society (Grammatas, 2014). At the same time, the prospect of utilization enhances the motivation of toddlers to participate in the production of texts (Iliia & Matsagouras, 2006).

Toddlers have the opportunity to repeat the process of questions and answers spontaneously, as a free activity. The educational program in this case turns into a mimetic game, where one toddler plays the teacher and the others the students and, of course, the roles alternate.

5. Results

Indicatively, two of the group texts and four of the individual texts of toddlers are listed.

5.1 Group texts

- A little girl came to stay in a castle near our school. This castle was built by the builders for a man to give to his wife who had her birthday, because the castle they lived in before was old. Just because the girl’s garden in her own home withered, this man and his wife regretted her crying and told her if she wanted to stay with them. The new castle has a garden with poppies, an apple tree, ladybugs and snails, which the little girl really likes. But also inside the castle they have vases with the most beautiful pink roses, with raindrops. The woman buys new roses every Wednesday at the street market. A pilot brought a little boy from another country to the castle. Now, the two children are playing together in the castle garden with balls and other exercise equipment and when they grow up they will come to our school too.
- A boy who is a refugee met a girl from our class at a children’s hospital. The boy did stunts in the street and fell and broke his leg. At the hospital, they placed a splint around his leg and put him in a wheelchair. Then, the little girl thought of helping him. She pushed his wheelchair to her house to stay close to him until he was well again. Then, she bought seeds. She planted them in the soil and watered them together with the boy. So, they sprouted slowly and a garden was made. The boy said, “This garden is perfect”. They will stay here together for a long time. But when the sun stops burning so much, the boy will return to his place to find his things which he has left there.

5.2 Individual Texts

- I found a pirate telescope on the beach. The pirate had let it down to build a tower in the sand. When he left the beach, he forgot to take his telescope with him. I look at the moon through this telescope. I play with it “statues immovable, day or night”. Then, I see a little boy coming towards me. He is alone and speaks a foreign language. I start singing and dancing mambo and the little girl dances with me. We dance a lot of songs all night. In the morning, we lie down on the sand. We sleep all day because we are very tired. In the evening, we start dancing again. We stay there for four days. We eat the fruit I have with me. When we eat them all, we go to the street market. We buy fruit and toys from there to go back to the beach and continue to dance. Passing by the house where I live, I call my parents and tell them: “Mom, dad, let me show you a new friend of mine”. They say “wow” and I leave with the little boy for the beach again.
- I met two little refugees in a shop where they sell shoes. I had gone to this store with my mom and brother. My brother had chosen shoes and we were waiting at the checkout. Then, the two children came to buy shoes for the little girl. The boy says to me: “You are very beautiful. Do you want to be friends?” I said “yes” and the little girl asked me to become friends with her too. My uncle was waiting in the car outside the store. My mom and brother left with him and I stayed to leave with my new friends. The little girl chose the pink shoes with butterflies on them. Then, we walked to my house. We played with my toys and drank orange and strawberry juice, which my mother had prepared. We slept together and the next day the children left for their hotel. They invited me to visit them. I went there by bus. We played with their toys and took walks in the garden. Every Thursday or Friday that I don’t have ballet lessons, I’ll go to the hotel and play with them.
- I met the two refugee children in the meadow when I went to pick flowers. I pick flowers to decorate the vases at my mom’s restaurant. The restaurant is called “Love” and is next to this meadow. The two children come to the restaurant to eat their favorite food, cooked meat and fries. When we found ourselves in the meadow, they told me “we took a walk here, to get some air”. The little boy was anxious what time it was. They wanted to take the plane. They’ll go to Paris to see the Eiffel Tower.
- Two little refugees come to my house every day to play. They don’t know anyone else here, they only know me. First, the little girl and I play with my dolls. Her favorite doll is Super Diva and my favorite doll is Barbie. The boy draws until we finish our game. Then, we all play hide and seek together in my yard. When night falls, the two children go to bed. I have never been where they live because they like playing in my house.

6. Conclusions

Toddlers became aware of the refugees. As part of the program, they reflected on and presented in their narratives the new life of refugees. In their stories, the refugees chose to be exclusively in childhood. They referred to the memories but also to the feelings of the refugee children. The young students also referred to their own perspective on refugees and the new reality of coexistence between them. The narrative texts of toddlers were dominated by the full equality of the refugees with the rest of the people, the coexistence, the harmonious and solidarity attitude of all towards the refugees.

The literary text offered a suitable stimulus to the children’s imagination, since having been assimilated, it

worked wonderfully for the toddlers as an experience, as an experience for their perception of the earth in relation to the universe. The imagination of toddlers proved to be inexhaustible. Each of their narratives was different, original, unrepeatable. Whenever a toddler made reference to his or her classmates’ narratives that had preceded, at the same time there was a wonderful use of these facts. As evidenced by the aptness of the narratives, their variety and the creative use of previous peer narratives, the ability to listen and communicate was fully developed for all toddlers.

The enthusiasm of all the toddlers for the participation in this educational program remained undiminished throughout. Through the conduct of the program, the relationship between all students without exception developed quantitatively, when cases of marginalization were excluded. Observing the free play of the toddlers, it was found that they have assimilated the questions that the teacher usually asks, thus dramatically improving the structure of their thinking.

The specific program can be carried out in all classes of Elementary and High School. In the case of older students, who have acquired relative proficiency in written expression, they first write their own texts on the subject of interaction with refugees and then they are presented in the classroom by being read by the students who produced them or by their classmates.

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