

Me and the Little Prince: When the Hero of Exupery Inspires the Creative Writing of Toddlers

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Abstract: The Little Prince, the main literary hero of the homonymous work of Exupery, is a universal and timeless symbol of childhood. As the author presents him in contrast to adult narrative characters, whose characteristics are imitated in the work, the reader perceives childhood as an idealized situation. In particular, the children-readers, as they identify with the specific literary model, acquire self-knowledge and self-confidence. The awareness that literature is the most effective and irreplaceable means of education, leads to the design and implementation of various educational programs with reference to the Little Prince, so that students from an early age could benefit from its enormous pedagogical value of the work of Exupery. In the first of the programs, the magic wand touches the students one after the other, so they choose which hero they will play. After wearing the characteristic object of this hero and taking the appropriate position on stage, answering the teacher's questions, they refer to the first person singular in the work through his own point of view. In the second program, toddlers are invited to imagine a meeting with the Little Prince, in order to reassure the pilot-narrator of the project, who eagerly asks the readers to be informed, if the Little Prince visited the earth again. In the third program, just as the pilot meets his children self in the desert in the person of the Little Prince, so the toddlers are invited to a meeting with their adult self where they project their personal desires, dreaming of their development. The narrations of the toddlers in the three programs that took place in different school years in Nursery Schools of Attica, are converted into written texts with the contribution of the teacher who records them. As toddlers realize that their oral speech is faithfully represented by writing, they experience creative writing, they are introduced to the process of recording and rescuing their creative thinking.

Key words: toddlers' education, the Little Prince, creative writing

1. Introduction

This presentation aims to show how toddlers develop a personal dialogue with the work of Exupery "The Little Prince", how they appropriate and enrich it with their personal characteristics, how they connect it with their experiences and desires. As it is a work that sensitizes and presents timeless and universal cultural values (Kouloubi-Papapetropoulou, 1993), the dialogue of toddlers with it, becomes valuable for the development of their creativity and critical thinking, contributes to their social and emotional maturity.

The narrator of "The Little Prince" discovers his true self, his lost childhood, when he is in conditions of

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danger, which favor mediation and self-concentration, away from the conventions and compromises that are usually imposed by adult life. The characteristics of “The Little Prince” as a narrative person are his points of contact with the children-readers. However, through reading the work from which the importance of childhood emerges, adults are emotionally charged, driven to existential concerns, and choose to return to childhood as a conscious way of life. The search for and preservation of the child’s self, as suggested by Exupery through his work “The Little Prince” (Iliia, 2012), is the highest justification of childhood and the safest path that leads to personal happiness.

“The Little Prince” is the reference point of three different programs from which toddlers’ texts emerge. The participating toddlers express themselves with originality, producing narrative texts of high standards for their age, through pedagogical interventions based on theories from the field of narrative and textual language, in combination with the characteristics of infancy, which are presented by the developmental psychology. The production of their texts moves within the context of the text-centered models of teaching written expression. The specific models take the text as a unit of didactic approach and teach their students the super-propositional rules and structures that distinguish the different types of specialized speech (Matsagouras, 2001, p. 96). Thus, the student gradually becomes more effective in understanding texts and more capable in verbal expression and in particular in the way of structuring thought. (Matsagouras, 2001, pp. 162–165; Matsagouras & Kouloubaritsi, 1999).

1.1 Implementation Elements

The three educational programs were carried out in the order presented in this paper during the school years 2006–2007, 2015–2016 and 2016–2017, in Nursery Schools in Attica. The second program took place exclusively in the framework of the Nursery School, which develops from 1 p.m. until 4 p.m. while the rest in classic sections.

2. Objectives

- The acquaintance with the world literary figure-symbol of the Little Prince and the initiation into the cultural, humanitarian values that he embodies. In general, the realization that literary works and their heroes are timeless and universal points of reference.
- The cultivation of literacy, as a result of the pleasure caused by reading as a creative, experiential process.
- The promotion of contact and communication between all toddlers, with their successive placement in the focus of the department. Furthermore, the cooperation of the whole to achieve a common, group-accepted goal, such as the fulfillment of the pilot’s desire to be informed of the return of the Little Prince to earth.
- The verbal development and especially the cultivation of the narrative ability.
- The cultivation of creative thinking.
- Understanding the connection between oral and written speech, the quality of written speech to faithfully represent the spoken word.

3. Methodology of Literary Educational Programs

Literary readings contribute to the development of creative thinking, to aesthetic cultivation, to contact with

timeless, cultural values, to language development, contribute to the mental and social maturity of the individual and promote literacy. Consequently, their role in the educational process is irreplaceable (Tompkins, 1988). This is due to the fact that reading any literary text is a very creative process. We become co-creators of the author, we form expectations for the development of the story (Iser, 1991), we identify with the heroes (Booth, 1987). As a result of this creative activity, we get the feeling that we are directly involved in the narrative events, that we personally experience situations and emotions that are attributed to the text (Iser, 1990). Since our contact with the literary work has the character of experience, it contributes decisively to our self-knowledge.

The ways of didactic approach of literary works are dictated by the nature of literature. In Nursery School, in particular, imaginative, attractive educational programs are used with a playful character (Poslaniek, 1992), in correspondence with the need of toddlers to play (Huizinga, 1989). By giving toddlers the opportunity to express their reading responses freely, either individually or in groups (Huck, Hepler & Hickman, 1979), to use literature as a source of inspiration and a driving force of their imagination (Kotopoulos, 2012), original narrative texts are produced that constitute creative imitation or modification or reversal of the literary model (Matsagouras, 2001).

The interview, first the semi-structured and then the unstructured, is used as a means of expressing the impressions and experiences of toddlers through the contact with the literary work. The teacher, as a very attentive listener, formulates, where necessary, clarifying questions in relation to the previous answers he has received (Pascucci & Rossi, 2002). The questions refer to the action of the heroes, the place, the time and its evolution, their feelings, the relationships between them and so on. According to the teaching principle of declining guidance, which includes student support processes during both the writing and pre-writing as well as post-writing stages (Matsagouras 2001, pp. 199–203), toddlers' answers gradually become fuller and clearer so the teacher's questions are significantly reduced. Furthermore, the children's texts are used in printed publications or posts on the blog *ekpaideutika programmata literature and education of the Panhellenic School Network* and are included in open school theatrical performances (Grammatas, 2014), as additional incentives for free and creative expression of toddlers (Ilia & Matsagouras, 2006).

4. Teaching Material

According to the narrative hypothesis of Exupery's play "The Little Prince", a pilot is forced to land in the African desert due to a malfunction of his plane, where he tries to repair it himself. There, he is approached by a strange creature who calls him the Little Prince. He gradually discovers that he comes from another planet. The Little Prince is characterized by imagination, sensitivity, responsibility, optimism and wisdom. He is the only person in the world who understands the children's drawings of the pilot, causing his surprise. He is also justified in his belief that if they search the desert for a well when they are in danger of thirst, they will find it and quench their thirst. In addition, he appreciates and enjoys the simple joys of life while refusing to accept the meaningless and boring lifestyle of adults. Finally, he is led to self-sacrifice for the rose he has left behind on his planet while at the same time seeking in every way to comfort the pilot for his painful departure from earth. The specific characteristics of the Little Prince are contrasted with those of the inhabitants of the other planets. The king, the vain, the drunkard, the businessman, the geographer and the lamplighter embody the passion for power, glory, money, authority or, conversely, the renunciation of the struggle of life and the inability to adapt to developments. These are people who, as they touch the ridiculousness, present to us their impasses, their tragedy, their loneliness (Ilia, 2007).

5. Presentation of Activities and Results

5.1 Games With the Little Prince

In the first educational program entitled “Games with the Little Prince”, the touch of toddlers with magic wand, transforms them into any of the literary figures of the book they wish. Each toddler, choosing an object of disguise and the appropriate position in space, impersonates the character with whom he has identified. For example, hula hoops wreaths represent the planets and a scarf is used to disguise oneself as a Little Prince. The narrative hypothesis is rendered in the context of the program through the perspective of the hero that each toddler has chosen to play, in which case the toddlers’ answers are given in the first person singular.

Of the three toddlers’ texts listed below for this program, the first refers to the thirteenth chapter, where the Little Prince visits the planet of a businessman, who incessantly counts the number of stars because he considers them his property: “I am the Little Prince and I count the stars, to tell God how many there are, because I think he will be bored to count them. When it is daytime and the stars are not visible, I measure the sky to tell people how big it is. Everyone would like to know but they do not measure it alone so that God doesn’t scold them. But God is my friend because I count stars for him”.

The second text refers to the fourteenth chapter, where the Little Prince meets a geographer, who asks him for information about his planet in order to record it in his book:

“I am a geographer and I ask the Little Prince to give me information to write about his planet. I haven’t written about my own planet yet, because so far I haven’t found time to explore it. I had to write about the other planets, since various explorers, the vain, the businessman and others kept coming and giving me information about their planets. I have only one last page left in my book, and there I am writing about the planet of the Little Prince. I have no paper left. When the Little Prince is gone, I will look in the shops to buy paper. There, I will write about my own planet that I will explore, looking for paper.”

The third text refers to the twenty-sixth chapter, where the Little Prince, in order to return to his planet to take care of the flower, chooses to die from a venomous snake bite: “I am the pilot. The Little Prince is lying next to me and is sleeping, because he is tired. We walked a lot because we want to leave the desert. The Little Prince doesn’t like it at all because the sand gets his clothes dirty”.

5.2 Meetings with the Little Prince

The second training program focuses on the epilogue of the book “The Little Prince”, where the pilot-narrator, inconsolable about the painful way that the Little Prince chose to return to his planet, addresses the following appeal to the readers: “If then a child comes to you, and laughs, and has golden hair, and does not respond when asked, you will of course guess who he is! Then, please, do me a favor! Don’t let me be so sad: write to me quickly that he is back...”. Toddlers respond enthusiastically by presenting their fantastic encounters with the Little Prince, while at the same time helping to make his wish come true to make friends on earth. Indicatively, an individual and a group text are listed:

My sister and I smell the flowers in the vase we have at home. The Little Prince walks out of the house. He also wants to smell our flowers to know what fragrance they have. He is curious if they will smell like his own flower which is red, because ours is pink. When he smells them, he tells us that they have the same scent as his flower. So, he stays there to smell them even more. When I tell him I have my own pet, he asks me to see it. He sees my pigeon but even then, he doesn’t leave. I told him that my mom has a baby in her womb. He will wait to

see that too and then he will leave.

They gave our classmate away a spaceship. At first, she didn't use it because she didn't know how to use it. When she saw on TV how they were driving it, she also learnt how to drive it. She took it and went to the planet of the Little Prince. She parked it in the parking lot that the Little Prince had built next to his house for the spaceships of his friends who are going to visit him. When our classmate got there, she found the Little Prince doing somersaults. He was very happy to meet a new friend. He told him to stop the bumps but he continued until he hit. Then, she hugged him, put him on the spaceship and brought him to her house to be taken care of by her mom.

5.3 Model Meeting Between the Pilot and the Little Prince

In the third training program, modeled on the pilot meeting with the Little Prince in the desert, toddlers are asked to produce texts with similar encounters with their adult self. As these are meetings that refer to their future, each toddler projects his personal wishes in his text, dreaming of his development. This program seeks to make children aware of the crucial role of childhood in the life of every human being. In order for the young students to realize that childhood experiences remain within us and constitute an integral part of our adult self (Ilia, 2012), Exupery's dedication to a friend is mentioned, which includes the phrase "All adults were once children, but few remember it". The children then watch the excerpt, where the pilot-narrator expresses his question about the presence of the Little Prince in the desert: So imagine my surprise, at dawn, which a small strange voice woke me up, saying:

Please...Draw me a lamb! So I looked at this apparition, rolling my eyes in amazement. You shouldn't forget that I was a thousand miles away from every residential area. And yet my little man didn't seem to me to be lost, either dead of fatigue, or dead of hunger, or dead of thirst, or dead of fear. He didn't look at all like a child lost in the middle of the desert, a thousand miles away from any residential area" (pp. 13-14).

Following is the reading of the excerpt, which expressed the question of the pilot that the Little Prince is the only person who understands his paintings. When toddlers realize that the Little Prince is the pilot's childish self, their respective narratives begin. The relative texts are indicative of those of a schoolgirl and a student.

It's night and I'm working. I'm a singer. People like my song. I understand that because they dance. There in the place where I sing, I see in front of me the little girl that I was in the past. I recognize her immediately, because I remember her well. She came there because she likes my bows. I buy bows from my friend, who makes them herself. The last time I bought this very beautiful blue bow that I'm wearing now. I give her away a pink bow. I was very happy to see her but I don't know if I see her again. Now I live in another house. But maybe if I go to the house where I grew up one day, I will find her there waiting for me. But I know she is happy, since what she always wanted was to become a singer. Her dream has now come true.

I came with my car for fishing. I am wearing my blue uniform and I have taken nine reeds with me. The fish I catch, I sell them in the bazaar. But I keep some to eat with my wife. Our baby still drinks only milk. As I am here at sea, I see in front of me my little self. He asks me what mom will make today to eat and I show him the fish I caught, to make fish soup. I ask him to come whenever I fish to find me on the beach to give him fish. He is very happy because I have my own car. It's blue, his favorite color.

6. Evaluation

The set of common goals was fully achieved as evidenced by the results of the three programs. More

specifically, toddlers became acquainted with the literary face of the Little Prince as a bearer of universal and timeless values.

Through the reading pleasure of this work, they realized the creativity of the reading process and developed a positive attitude towards literary books in general.

Toddlers willingly collaborated and actually communicated with each other, with reference to the work of Exupery. Their ability to produce complete and clear narrative texts was also cultivated. In addition, they understood the ability of writing to faithfully represent oral speech.

The variety and aptness of toddlers' reading response to the work of Exupery proves how much the literary quality is a valuable stimulus for their divergent thinking.

Toddlers, realizing the importance of childhood, the decisive role in later life, gain self-confidence and begin to gain self-knowledge.

Interest in the programs remained intact throughout their duration. All toddlers were looking forward to producing their own texts. As listeners, they watched with great interest the stories of their classmates, thus ensuring the originality of their own texts. All the narrative versions of toddlers are imaginative and optimistic, fulfilling both the pilot's wish for the Little Prince to return to Earth and the Little Prince's wish to make more friends.

As for the encounter of toddlers during their adulthood with their childhood self, there is a great variety in their texts. In most cases, the child self comes to the adult one to meet some of his own needs, to seek protection or help. In some others, the meeting takes place for no particular reason, however, it is equally enjoyed by children and adults alike. Finally, in some narratives what brings the child self closer to the adult one, is the interest or admiration of the former for the achievements of the latter.

Apart from the nursery schools, the specific programs could be comfortably implemented in all the first three grades of Primary School.

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