

“Promoting the Acceptance of the ‘other’ through Drama in Education”

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Abstract

The present study concerns the exploration of the effect of the techniques of drama in education on the acceptance of the “other”. A review of the relevant literature and a comparison of studies on a worldwide level provide the required theoretical and research background for the foundation of the specific educational theatre program which concerned the use of drama in education techniques in the frame of intercultural education. Specifically, during the implementation of the educational theatre program, drama in education techniques were used with a view to promoting the mutual acceptance and collaboration of students coming from different cultural environments. The results of this study were positive in that the role-playing and teamwork techniques of drama in education contributed to the creation of a suitable environment to achieve acceptance of the “other” as well as the interaction, communication, collaboration and mutual acceptance between the students who participated in the educational theatre program.

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Öz

Bu çalışma eğitimde drama tekniklerinin “ötekinin” kabulü üzerindeki etkilerini inceler. İlgili literatür taraması ve dünya çapındaki çalışmaların karşılaştırılması eğitimde drama tekniklerini kültürlerarası eğitim kapsamında içeren tiyatro eğitim programı için gerekli teorik ve araştırma arka planını sağlamıştır. Eğitimde drama teknikleri farklı kültürel ortamlardan gelen öğrencilerin birbirlerini kabul etmelerini ve işbirliği yapmalarını teşvik etme amacıyla kullanılmıştır. Çalışmanın sonucunda; rol yapma ve ekip çalışması gibi eğitimde drama tekniklerinin “ötekinin” kabulü için uygun ortam oluşmasına ve projeye katılan öğrencilerin etkileşimi, iletişimi, işbirliği ve karşılıklı kabullenmesine katkı sağladığı belirlenmiştir.

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Introduction

The intercultural dimension in education has become necessary in Greece in recent years due to the changes which have occurred in the composition of the groups of students studying in Greek schools (Magos, 2013, p.199). At the same time, it has served as an incentive for the implementation of intercultural education aiming to create suitable conditions for achieving intercultural communication as a means of building and giving meaning not only to individual but also to collective identities (Govaris, 2011, p.175).

The ability to effectively communicate in cultural situations and to form relationships in a variety of cultural settings is characterized as intercultural competence (Bennett & Bennett, 2001, 6) and has to do with the development of social skills concerning the acceptance and appreciation of “otherness” and with the creative management of its elements for the alteration of previously held positions and opinions (Magos, 2005, p.199). The following are characterized as dimensions of intercultural competence: a) intercultural sensitivity which focuses on positive emotions which contribute to the appreciation and respect of cultural differences, b) intercultural awareness which focuses on cultural self-awareness and culture specific awareness and c) intercultural relativism which focuses on flexibility, empathy and maintenance of identity (Chen & Starosta, p.2008). As a result, the characteristics of intercultural competence concern emotional flexibility, individual autonomy, adaptability, open-mindedness and perceptual acuteness (Bennett, 2004).

In this specific framework, educational programs whose goal is to develop intercultural competence which aims at abolishing discrimination, achieving equality, mutual understanding, mutual acceptance and solidarity (Palaiologou & Evangelou, 2003, p.74), adopt methods and practices which promote equal interaction as a means to acceptance of the “other” and the co-existence of students from different cultural backgrounds and concern intercultural activities which put into doubt stereotypes and prejudices (Magos, 2013, p.210).

Theoretical Background

Drama in Education (DiE) is an art form and a means of education based on current pedagogical principles and theories of teamwork, role-play and constructive learning and contributes to the development of social positions and values (Bolton, 1984; Heathcote, 1985; O’Neil, 1995; Alkistis, 2000; Tsiaras, 2007; Papadopoulos, 2010; Papaioannou, 2016).

As Alkistis states (2008, p.216), DiE can play a positive role in mastering the principles of intercultural education having to do with the promotion of intercultural empathy, solidarity and “intercultural” respect. Through the activities of DiE, students occasionally act out social norms and social interactions in which they are emotionally invested resulting in their learning empathy and in part discovering unknown aspects of their personalities through their individual performances while fulfilling the specific collaborative activities. The enactment of roles, characters and events requires the activation of knowledge and experience and the “unlocking” of emotions related to each case while at the same time leads to the exploration of a variety of social and emotional circumstances which the students themselves re-enact (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; Fleming, 2001; Neelands, 2008; Alkistis, 2008; Lenakakis, 2015 & 2018; Tsiaras, 2016).

From the literature review it is seen that both abroad and in Greece, studies have been conducted at different educational levels with positive results regarding mainly the contribution of

DiE techniques in the development of collective empathy, in acquiring intercultural competence, in managing conflicts, in intercultural communication, in intercultural sensitization, in assimilation of and co-existence of students in intercultural environments, in eliminating racist and “xenophobic” behaviors, in the acceptance of otherness and of different cultural “identities” (O’Toole & Burton, 2002; Blight, 2003; Donelan, 2005; Gallagher, 2010; Letsiou, 2010; Giannouli, 2014; Mardas, 2016; Skaprentzou, 2016; Chaska, 2017).

At the same time, research programs have been conducted regarding a) the use of DiE techniques as a means of promoting cultural self-awareness and adaptability in intercultural schools (Alkistis, 2008, p.305-373); b) educational theatre programs for development of intercultural competence (Sextou, 2007, p.41-72) as well as c) didactic recommendations for using DiE techniques aimed at eliminating prejudices and at the acceptance of difference (Avdi & Chatzigeorgiou, 2007, p.109-129, p.197, p.214).

In conclusion, it seems that the extended use of DiE in recent years and the place it has secured in the Primary Education Courses of Study as a distinct body of knowledge in our country, has rendered it widely accepted in the educational community (Papaioannou, 2016). Furthermore, extended use has contributed significantly to DiE being used in educational practice in the development of social skills related to the acceptance and appreciation of “otherness”, in the creative management of its components for the alteration of previously held positions and opinions aiming at developing interpersonal relationships in the contemporary school and in the co-existence and interaction of students from different cultural backgrounds.

Objective

The objective of this research was the exploration of the effect of DiE techniques in the acceptance of the “other” in second grade students in primary school in Greece. The research questions posed for examination were:

- a. Can the use of DiE techniques contribute to the interaction of students coming from different cultural environments?
- b. Can the use of DiE techniques promote collaboration between students in an “inter-cultural” classroom?

Methodology

The present research is a case-study concerning the use of DiE techniques in the development of intercultural competence. The selection of the specific methodology was based on the fact that it provides the ability to observe social situations and capture their special characteristics and as a result is suitable for the observation of the characteristics of a specific classroom and for drawing conclusions regarding the effect of DiE techniques on the relationships of participating students (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008, p.314-315).

Sixteen (16) second grade students attending school in a semi-urban area in the county of Larisa, Greece participated in the study. It should be noted that the composition of the specific class was diverse with respect to the cultural background of the students. Specifically, the participants were comprised of five students of Albanian background, two Roma and nine native (Greek) students, a fact which created conflicts and a lack of cooperation between them in group activities. In this qualitative

social study, the socio-cultural features of a singular case of students were examined with a view to interpreting and analyzing the social framework of the specific classroom (Iosifidis, 2008, p.59-60).

Data was collected through the use of participatory observation utilizing journal notes and through the composition of written texts by the students. Specifically, participatory observation, which is suitable for systematic observation of social behavior in the “natural” environment where that behavior occurs (Iosifidis, 2008, p.126), concerned the documentation and evaluation of the characteristics of the learning environment in relation to the interaction and level of collaboration of the students during the implementation of the educational theatre program (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008; Mason, 2003). The composition of texts in the form of letters was used with a view to documenting the opinions and perceptions which arose from the collaboration of the students during the implementation of the DiE activities with respect to the subject of the literary texts regarding the acceptance of “otherness” and of the “other” (Avdi & Chatzigeorgiou, 2007, 96; Papadopoulos, 2010, p.255-257).

Description of the Educational Theatre Program

The educational theatre project was conducted in 2017 within the frame of the Flexible Zone Program and lasted 3 months, from February through April, during which twelve (12) interventions were implemented. The program was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, the students carried out activities and played games to enable them to become acquainted, build trust, collaborate and communicate (“Name with movement”, “Name with adjective”, “Your hand, please”, “Mirrors”, “Guiding the blind”, “Dancing blind”, “Little train”, “Together we stop – together we start”). The specific activities were conducted with the aim of creating a suitable environment to achieve communication and collaboration between the native students, the Roma and the students of Albanian heritage in an experiential and playful way (Alkistis, 1998; Govas 2002; Tsiaras, 2016).

In the second phase, literary texts from the 1st and 2nd Grade Readers of primary school, *The Dolphin*, were used (Tsilimeni, Grekos, Kaisaris & Kaplanoglou, 2002) regarding the acceptance of diversity. The use of literary texts with intercultural content contributes to the positive attitude of students with respect to the “other”, in abolishing prejudices related to cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious differences and can be used in educational practice with a view to understanding social and cultural attitudes and perceptions which are consistent with the principles of intercultural education (Chondolidou, 2002, 118-119; Paparousi, 2007; p.201- 212; Avdi & Chatzigeorgiou, 2007, p.125-129, p.197-199, p.214-223; Magos, 2012; Zogaki, 2017).

Giving meaning to literary texts may be achieved, according to the Literature Course of Study (P.S. 2011), through the techniques of DiE. In addition, positive results were achieved in studies which used DiE activities for an approach to literary works aimed at the students’ understanding, assigning meaning to and responsiveness in relation to the issues raised in the literary texts (Papadopoulos, 2004 & 2006; DeBlase, 2005; Katsaridou, 2011; Devlin, 2013; Weng, O’Toole & Sinclair, 2013; Papaioannou, 2016).

In the specific framework and according to the commonly accepted point of view - as stated above, that DiE techniques may contribute to the co-existence and positive interaction of students coming from different cultural backgrounds - the students of the specific class approached the literary texts presented below through the aforementioned experiential and teamwork activities.

In the first literary text, “*S as in swordfish*” by Maria Frangia (Tsilimeni, Grekos, Kaisaris & Kaplanoglou, 2002, p.35-36), the author combines imaginary and real elements related to attending school and focuses on the acceptance of diversity. The protagonist of the story, a small swordfish, is not accepted by his classmates and often receives critical comments from them resulting in his not wanting to go to school until an unexpected event turns him a hero as he saves his classmates and teacher from a huge net. The approach to the literature was carried out through the following techniques: “Teacher in Role”, “Conscience Alley”, “Gossip Circle”, “Time Machine”, “Interviews”, “Composition” (Papadopoulos, 2010, p.247-274; Alkistis, 2008, p.260-269; Avdi & Chatzigeorgiou, 2007, p.86-96).

In the second literary text, *Give love* by Angeliki Varela (Tsilimeni, Grekos, Kesaris & Kaplanoglou, 2002, 107-108), the author refers to mutual acceptance and the development of friendships among students attending an intercultural school. She inventively utilizes the organization of a celebration in the classroom, a celebration about friendship with a view to the students exchanging presents amongst themselves. During the celebration, the gift that stands out is that of a student of Polish background who gives each of his classmates an apple telling them to “Give love the way you give an apple, so simply.” The approach to the literature was carried out through the following techniques: “Role Play”, “Frozen Picture”, “Television Show”, “Circular Drama”, “Team Dialogue”, “Composition” (Papadopoulos, 2010, p.247-274; Alkistis, 2008, p.260-269; Avdi & Chatzigeorgiou, 2007, p.86-96).

It should be noted that the students, as stated before, produced texts in the form of letters addressed to the central character of each story that was approached through the DiE activities (Avdi & Chatzigeorgiou, 2007, p.96; Alkistis, 2008, p.288; Papadopoulos, 2010, p.255-258). In addition, it is noted that after the completion of the DiE activities of each intervention, a discussion occurred aimed at reflection upon and expression of the thoughts and perceptions of the students in relation to the subject addressed by each literary work (Alkistis, 2008, p.281 - 291).

Results

From the participatory observation and the documentation of “social” behaviors of the participating students during the educational theatre project (Iosifidis, 2008, p.127), it arose that during the first interventions of the implementation of the get-to-know, trust, collaboration and communication games and activities, the students sought to participate in teams comprised of students having their same ethnic background. It should be noted that the students were free to choose which team they wanted to join in order to implement the aforementioned activities, a fact which provided them a great degree of freedom but which simultaneously made the selection criterion of the team members based on their Greek or Albanian background clear and resulted in many instances in the marginalization of the Roma students with respect to the other groups. Following the educational theatre program, after the interventions concerning the approach of literary works with intercultural content were implemented through use of DiE techniques, the composition of the teams gradually began to change. Initially teams were formed wherein either Roma and native students participated or native students and Albanian background students participated but later on teams were formed comprised of Roma, native and Albanian background students. As a result, the DiE techniques created the appropriate environment and positive atmosphere to enable the collaboration and the

interaction amongst all the students. This suggests that through the specific activities, the students accepted their different cultural identities and operated as members of the specific social framework they found themselves in, in other words, of the specific “intercultural” classroom.

From the analysis of the texts (Iosifidis, 2008, p.147) written by the students in the form of letters, as stated above, two categories of analysis arose. The first concerns the acceptance of linguistic and ethnic difference and of the “other” and the second concerns intercultural sensitivity and emotional flexibility regarding the “other”. With respect to the first category, we indicatively cite some of the verbal accounts the students used in the letters they wrote: *“Dear Janus, it does not bother me that you are from Poland”, “Dear good friend, Janus...”, “Dear Friend...”, “Dear swordfish...”, “My dear friend, swordfish.....”, “I don’t care that you are from another country”, “I don’t care that you are from Poland. I can show you the sights of my city”, “It does not bother me that you are from another country and I want to become friends”, “I don’t care that your background is from another country, do you want to play together?”, “Let’s go...to new countries”, “In school you will find new friends”, “You will have a very good time in Greece”, “You will learn Greek”, “I would like you to stay in Greece”, “I know you don’t speak Greek well but do you want to be friends?”, “I want you to be my classmate”, “You are one of the best friends I have made so far”, “We will sit together”, “Because you are different from us, you saved us!!!”, “Your nose made you a hero!”, “Dear swordfish, I want us to become friends and I don’t care that you are not like me”, “I don’t mind that you have a big nose, I want us to become friends”, “You don’t have to feel bad because you are different since you are a hero”, “We will always hang out”, “I want us to play together”, “I want us to be in the same class”, “We want you in our school with us”, “I want us to be best friends”.*

With respect to the second category, we indicatively cite some of the verbal accounts the students used in the letters they wrote: *“I was so pleased with your gift, it was wonderful”, “We thank you for your gift and that you are so generous”, “I would like to give you a gift as well”, “I really liked it that you gave everyone apples”, “I have to say 100 thanks”, “I will introduce you to my school”, “Do you want to be friends?”, “Your behavior was very good”, “I also got you an excellent gift”, “If you have time, come to the game at 8.30. You will also play”, “Thanks for saving us”, “You are my hero”, “We will never make fun of you again”, “Sorry for making fun of you”, “We love you very much”, “I am sorry for making you sad”, “I will not laugh at you”, “Will we go eat candy?”, “We will go for walks”, “Every weekend, we will go on excursions”, “I want us to hang out because I don’t want you to be alone”, “Do you want us to teach you Greek?”, “You can become the leader of the class”, “We will go to the amusement park together”, “I will throw you a party”, “Do you want to play volleyball?”, “Do you want to come to my house?”, “I want us to become friends because you are a very good kid”, “With many kisses, your friend Elena/Vayia”, “With appreciation, Eutichia/Denis”, “With love, Katerina/Meggie”, “Your friend, Antonis/Marinos”, “With love, your friend, Adem/Vasilis”.*

From the results of the analysis of the texts, it appears that approaching literary works with intercultural content through DiE techniques contributed to the understanding of the messages relayed by the literature through the experiences of the characters referred to therein and simultaneously positively influenced the acceptance of the “other” by the students who participated in the theatrical education program.

Conclusions

Based on the results, the educational theatre program had a significant effect on the acceptance of the “other” by the second grade students of the primary school. The results of the present study are in agreement with the respective conclusions of similar studies in which DiE techniques were used with the aim of achieving intercultural competence, conflict management, assimilation and co-existence of students of different cultural backgrounds and the acceptance of otherness and diversity and different cultural “identities” (O’Toole & Burton, 2002; Blight, 2003; Conrad, 2004; Donelan, 2005; Letsiou, 2010; Giannouli, 2014; Magdas, 2016; Skarpentzou, 2016; Zourdou, 2017; Chaska, 2017).

Moreover, from the interpretation of the qualitative analysis of the data, it was determined that the use of DiE techniques positively influenced the mutual acceptance and collaboration of the students attending the specific “multi-cultural” classroom. Specifically, from the participatory observation and the documentation of the characteristics of the learning environment, it arose that the students interacted and collaborated during the DiE activities, which suggests that the specific activities contributed to the creation of a suitable environment to achieve mutual acceptance among the native students, those of Albanian background and Roma students.

Likewise, from an informal discussion that occurred with the responsible educator of the specific class, it arose that not only during the educational theatre program but also after its completion, the “atmosphere” in the classroom improved with respect to the students’ relationships in that the conflicts between them were minimized and the level of their cooperation during group activities increased.

In addition, from the interpretation of the analysis of the contents of the texts, it arose that the said educational theatre program contributed to the acceptance of linguistic and ethnic difference and of the “other” as well as to intercultural sensitivity and emotional flexibility with regard to the “other”. As a result, the project contributed to the development of the features and dimensions of intercultural competence (Bennett & Bennett, 2001, p.6; Magos, 2005, 199; Chen & Starosta, 2008).

In conclusion, interpreting the results of the present study, it seems that the utilization in the educational practice of educational theatre programs a) aimed at mutual understanding, mutual acceptance and in the solidarity of students attending “multi-cultural classes” (Paleologo & Evangelou, 2003, p.74) and b) which adopt experiential and collaborative group methods as a means of accepting the “other” and the co-existence of students from different cultural groups (Magos, 2013, p.210), can be effective intercultural undertakings which will positively impact the promotion and acquisition of intercultural competence of the participating students.

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