

Through The Lens of Literature: The Contribution of Literature to the Cultivation of Intercultural Empathy by Exploring the Other's Cultural Perspective to Bridge Distances



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SUMMARY: The modern school of the 21st century is characterized by a pluralism in terms of student potential due to transformations at the social, political, cultural, national and global level. The coexistence of students from different cultural backgrounds is a challenge. Literature as a cultural product may contribute to the cultivation of intercultural empathy and acceptance of diversity, ameliorating interpersonal relationships. The present study examines how this can be achieved in the classroom, where group dynamics are constantly shaped through various processes. In the present study, ways of utilizing the literature are proposed regarding the treatment of issues related to identity, stereotypes, gender discrimination.

KEYWORDS: intercultural education, intercultural empathy, acceptance, understanding

INTRODUCTION

At European and global level, the composition of societies makes imperative the need for cultural understanding, for the cultivation of acceptance and respect for *the Stranger*. International organizations such as Unesco and Unicef underline the significance of Human Rights, emphasizing the need for equal coexistence. The current socio-economic and political conditions have led to corresponding transformations at all levels on a global scale. Migration and refugees flows due to economical reasons or wars in neighboring countries have resulted in an increase in the influx of refugees and migrants and their absorption by host countries. Education has not been unaffected by all these. In classes there are students from different cultural and social backgrounds, with different culture, religious, ideology. Teachers have to manage this diversity in the spirit of a solidarity pedagogy with the aim of acceptance, respect and understanding. Intercultural education in these environments is a necessity aimed at better inclusion of all students, responding to their needs and empowering them through various techniques, strategies and practices. It also tries to bridge cultural and ideological gaps, removing discrimination and deconstructing prejudices, emphasizing empathy, interaction and cultural exchanges (Angelidis & Chatzistiriou, 2013).

Literature may contribute in the direction of cultivating intercultural consciousness, empathy and understanding. Depending on the adopted point of view, literature may contribute either to the deconstruction or strengthening of stereotypes and ideological prejudices. Moreover, a literary text as a carrier of ideology of the creator, the reader and the context, reflects the reality and the relationships that are formed in the social environment (Maniatis, 2013). In the light of a Culturally Awareness Pedagogy (Gay, 2010), literature may be the vehicle of awareness and attitude modification. With its multicultural and universal dimension, literature may embrace the whole world and become a field of convergence and coexistence. Cai (2008) underlines the threefold aspect of literature: a) as inclusive, accepting as many cultures as possible, on an equal and non-discriminatory basis; b) as ethnically oriented with emphasis on national and gender prejudices; and c) as multicultural.

Nowadays, there is an intense production in the field of literature and especially children's literature with the aim of raising awareness, acceptance, combating racism and exclusion (Gavriilidou, 2013). Many writers dare to raise issues of racism and discrimination, to stigmatize social and gender injustices in the context of a critical emancipation, with the aim of cultivating empathy, redefining values, promoting solidarity and cooperation, without ethnocentric or monocentric point of view. Literature begins to become polyphonic, realistic, human, universal, as literary representations capture the reality and the true face of societies, without concealing the truth.

1. Exploring the different points of view

Children's and adolescent's literature presents a range of books that cover various aspects of reality in the field of social transformation and human interpersonal relationships and acceptance. Thus, the reader can read books on the acceptance of the foreigner, whether he is a victim of war or immigration (such as the book titled *Melak, alone*), or books where stereotypical perceptions and prejudices or ideological attitudes and cultural views are detected (such as "I want to tell you the truth", "Brown

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disgusting ball’), as well as books on social exclusion due to financial situation and poverty (ex. *The Invisible*). In all these books, the reception and the representation of the ‘Foreigner’ and the exploration of the author's point of view and how he/she captures this reality is interesting. Also of great interest it is the detection of dominant attitudes and perceptions regarding gender discrimination, racism and prejudice. In contemporary books it is observed a new tendency to be revealed the point of view of the ‘Other’, an internal focus of how someone in difficulty feels in order to understand him/her better changing one’s attitude. Alexandra Mitsiali has given three very important samples of intercultural literary writing that refer to the treatment of the immigrant, the foreigner, who lives and coexists in a society different from his own. The writer negotiate the matter of stereotypes and identities not from the point of dominant culture in a try to give voice to all. Each one of three books exploits the proper narrative technique each time to challenge a discussion among pupils. This trilogy questions the way we interpret reality and illuminates other’s perspective, regarding our multicultural readiness. In this direction it contributes not only the illustration but also the lack of didacticism and the realism with which the writer tries to cultivate acceptance of the other, understanding, social awareness, highlighting pluralism on humanitarian approach and the realization of a critical emancipation.

Dealing with foreigners in general, whether they are victims of war or economic migrants it is a social issue in many modern children's literature books, which illuminate attitudes of xenophobia, reservation, denial or acceptance. These are books that raise awareness and at the same time provide the opportunity to start an honest dialogue on the management of ethnic diversity, identity and values (Anagnostopoulou, 2005, 2007, 2021). Indicatively we mention the books: *Hard nut*, *Brown disgusting ball*, *Ortansia keeps the secrets*, *Melak*, *alone*. According to Alexandra Zervou (2019), in most books the mood of understanding of the other and the promotion of coexistence is encouraged, overcoming phobias and prejudices. Moreover, it is promoted the idea of importance of diversity (Kanatsouli, 2007) and the redefining morals and attitude in transforming multicultural world.

All these books try to illuminate each point of view in justice and honestly, invoking emotion in order to help other children to ‘get in the shoe of the rejected’ and understand how one feels being in margin. Literature contributes to this through its power to emotionally touch the reader.

2. The cultivation of intercultural understanding and empathy in modern classes with literature as a vehicle

Literature may capture reality and illuminate the various manifestations of diversity, thanks to the universality of its character (Akritopoulos, 2021). The power of storytelling in combination with experiential activities and techniques (Artzanidou, Goulis, Grosdos, Karakitsios, 2011 · Papadatos, 2014) can be important means and pedagogical tools in managing diversity but also in cultivating the empathy of all students, including native ones. The realistic textual narrative, the empathic often accompanying illustration, which most of the times also tells the story in its own way, the exploitation of music or visual arts, the role-playing games or drama techniques form a channel of communication and a means of bridging cultural distances and perceptions and this is an additional reason where various programs for cultivating social and emotional skills utilize storytelling and art.

Engaging in projects related to the negotiation of concepts and identities (Chontolidou2000), the acquaintance with the wealth and tradition of different peoples, the critical negotiation of scenarios through debates and interactive confrontations, the critical analysis of works of art in combination with texts in the context of a transformative critical analysis, the dealing with stereotypes and prejudices through active techniques and experiential games, are also didactic suggestions for a meaningful dialogue about the coexistence and inclusion of all. Moreover, the translated children's literature or the bilingual presentation of a story offers the possibility of participation of the foreign student and a sign of respect for the other and constitutes a bridge to the cultural osmosis (Gavriilidou, 2021). Finally, the contact and acquaintance with the habits, customs, and traditions of other peoples on the occasion of a story, is a way of approaching an intercultural character. And of course all these proposals should be performed through active, structured, participatory techniques (such as brainstorming and role-playing games), experiential games (*frozen images*, *the corridor of consciousness*, *chair of truth*), visual representations, and creative writing. Education may conduct to *change* (social and emotional) and literature is a means to facilitate this *change* in attitude.

The selection of books is of great importance in order to raise awareness and cultivate empathy and intercultural understanding and acceptance in the whole class. We need books that do not undermine the pluralism of the point of views (Giannikopoulou, 2009), but favor the critical emancipatory negotiation of history through the examination of the narrative constructions of the represented reality (Kalogirou, Karagianni, 2021), the deconstruction of the anti-stereotypes of dominant cultures (Maniatis Politis, 2015 · Politis, 2021), encouraging at the same time the free expression of views and experiences. The role of the teacher is crucial in managing diversity and accepting the different in the classroom.

2.1 Deconstructing stereotypes through experiential activities: an intervention with the help of literature

How can we deconstruct stereotypes and prejudices in a class? How a literature story can contribute to this? We are going to present an example as it was implemented in a diversity class through structured literature-based program, titled: ‘*we are becoming a huge hug. Let’s embrace everyone*’. The intervention lasted four didactic hours.

At first. We read the story ‘I want to tell you the truth’ of Alexandra Mitsiali. This story refers to the treatment of migrants from the dominant host country and it also reveals a serious social problem: child labour. Emiglé is a little migrant who is obliged

Through The Lens of Literature: The Contribution of Literature to the Cultivation of Intercultural Empathy by Exploring the Other's Cultural Perspective to Bridge Distances

to work in his free time and goes to school in the morning. He doesn't speak the greek language well. Every day feels tired and sometimes sleeps at desk. Daphne, a classmate of Emiglé saw him by chance at the park selling tissues and started to understand him better. One day a quarrel was caused in classroom and the teacher punished Emiglé. It is touching the initiative of little Daphne to defend her classmate, knowing his secret, standing tall in the established stereotypes. She opposes the unjust treatment of Emiglé just because he is a foreigner. She defends the truth. The fact that the defense of justice and equal treatment comes from a small child, a girl who restores the truth with honesty and courage, has its semiology. Daphne and Emiglé become close friends.

After reading the story we started a dialogue with all the students, trying to detect their feelings and opinions about Emiglé treatment from the teacher through critical questions. We draw the outline of the hero and ask from the children to write in it their beliefs about Emiglé's feelings and outside of it what others believe about Emiglé, their attitudes.

Classroom is separated in groups trying to investigate what happens with Emiglé. We use Debono's technique: six hats of thinking. Each group takes over a certain role (according to its hat). After gathering all the facts, the information and the views, all the teams present their analysis and propositions. After all this procedure, a debate is taking place about teacher's attitude against Emiglé. At the end, every one writes in his diary his/her opinion and feelings. Subsequently, the teacher plays a game with students. He share cards with stereotypical states to everyone and all must criticize his own. A constructive dialogue is taking place giving voice to all. Finally, with a very impressive drama technique, the corridor of consciousness, all pupils cultivate empathy and learn to explore the point of view of others, get in one's shoes, accept difference and respect it.

3. Benefits from structured based programs of Literature

Reading a literary book is equivalent to a journey of self-knowledge. It is also an attempt to communicate with the text and the author (Rosenblatt, 1983). Through the filtering of the narrative and the identification with the heroes, the reader is given the opportunity to think and reflect, to engage cognitively and emotionally in the story, to experience situations, to explore, to analyze, to judge, to penetrate into internal aspects, to make multiple interpretations. In this way he becomes part of history, suffers and sympathizes, discovers other ways of thinking and interacting. In a way, he forms his identity (Akritopoulos, 2021), getting acquainted with other worlds, their culture, their way of life, overcoming barriers and borders. Literature often provides food for thought and a chance for creativity, as well as the means to dream and enjoy, to unlock new doors and to travel on new paths made from the materials of imagination and dreams.

In addition, literature cultivates emotional intelligence, as it enables the reader to see the other's point of view, to experience adventure and various situations and emotions. Through reading activities, it is cultivated a climate of cooperation and values such as respect, equality, acceptance. Empathy strengthens trust and brings people closer (Triliva 2008: 167), forging solid interpersonal relationships, because it focuses on emotions and mainly on the similarities between people. This empathetic response to the story cultivates at the same time the social awareness and the understanding of the other's perspective (Triliva, 2008: 166), giving voice to all as equal members who can freely and effortlessly express ideas and their deeper thoughts.

In conclusion, students through literature-based structured programs and reading activities except from reading pleasure may also manage to escape with their imagination to other worlds, to dream, to share experiences and ideas, to cultivate in depth human values and feelings, to discover their identity. Literature is, after all, the ticket to a better world where values are forged and critical readers are developed with strength and courage for the challenges of life. Readers are transformed to the future designers of a better world with humanitarian ideals and principles and vision of social change.

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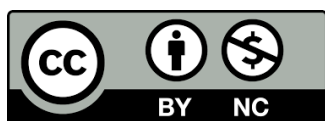
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Through The Lens of Literature: The Contribution of Literature to the Cultivation of Intercultural Empathy by Exploring the Other's Cultural Perspective to Bridge Distances

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