

## DRAMA PEDAGOGY FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN: A MEANS FOR EMPOWERMENT AND COMMUNICATION

L'article présente l'impact d'un projet de pratique théâtrale sur des enfants nouveaux arrivants en Grèce. L'objectif était de développer chez les enfants les compétences nécessaires pour leur intégration linguistique, éducative et sociale dans la société grecque. Vingt enfants de Syrie -11 garçons et 9 filles âgés de 6 à 12 ans et élèves d'une classe d'accueil dans une école publique en Grèce - ont participé pendant 6 mois à ce projet visant à faciliter leur inclusion dans le système éducatif grec. Trois chercheurs et onze étudiantes universitaires faisaient partie de l'équipe de recherche. Des activités basées sur la pédagogie par le théâtre visaient à encourager les enfants à utiliser toutes les ressources disponibles (langues et autres modes) pour communiquer. Les pratiques de traduction et d'alternance des langues étaient encouragées afin d'améliorer les interactions entre les enfants et avec leurs tutrices dans un environnement joyeux et ludique.

● **Magda Vitsou** | University of Thessaly, **Maria Papadopoulou** | University of Thessaloniki & **Eleni Gana** | University of Thessaly



Magda Vitsou is a Laboratory Teaching Staff in the Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Thessaly.



Maria Papadopoulou is an associate Professor of Literacies and Language Education of The School of Early Childhood Education at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.



Eleni Gana is an assistant professor at the Department of Special Education, University of Thessaly, Greece.

### Introduction

Over the past years, Europe has experienced the greatest mass movement since the Second World War. Many reports (INEE, 2009; UNCHR, 2015, 2017) indicate that more than one third of the refugee population were displaced children with no access to education.

In 2016, the Greek government, aiming to address the social exclusion of refugees, implemented education provision for all school-age refugee children who were to attend Greek Schools, nearby camps or places of residence, anytime throughout the school year. In the afternoon classes called 'Refugee Reception and Training Structure' (henceforth called RRTS), students studied Greek as a second language, English, mathematics, sports, arts and computer science. It is beyond doubt that this transition was a difficult and complicated issue and therefore there was a need for cooperation between formal and informal institutions (Ministry of Education, Universities, NGOs and volunteers).

### 1. The impact of Drama Pedagogy on Language Education

The use of drama-based approaches for language learning has been well documented in the literature (Cumming & Visser, 2009; Souki, 2019), and is a growing area of interest for researchers. However, little work has been done so far to apply this approach in supporting newly arrived children. Dunn, Bundy and Woodrow (2012) argue that a strong initial focus on oral language development is especially important for children with a refugee background.

Drama pedagogy facilitates language acquisition not only in the mainstream language classroom but in the second language classroom focusing on both verbal and nonverbal modes of communication that exist in real life (Ntelioglou, 2014). The integration of new knowledge occurs unconsciously and is added to existing knowledge while focus is placed on play and collaborative learning. At the same

**Drama provides students with an opportunity to use a variety of modes, to communicate, represent, and interpret their worlds collectively and individually.**

time, drama has the potential to lower the learners' affective filter (Krashen, 1988), helping them overcome their inhibitions, as well as their shyness and anxiety. Additionally, drama provides students with an opportunity to use a variety of modes, to communicate, represent, and interpret their worlds collectively and individually. Furthermore, according to Bengochea, Sembiente and Gort (2018) through drama conventions children make use of various semiotic resources so as create identities for themselves and others and 'make/generate' spaces for peer culture. In the context of an educational project using drama techniques, we attempted to search whether drama sessions could facilitate communication among people with few shared language resources.

## **2. Description of the project**

Since October 2016 in Greece, refugee children have enrolled in the Greek educational system in large numbers. In this context, the 'Language and Culture' Lab at the University of Thessaly designed a six-month project called "Literacy through Drama", taking into account that a collaborative environment devoid of fear of failure could result in stronger linguistic outcomes in favor of the newly arrived children.

The project, implemented in a reception class (RRTS) in a public school of Volos, aimed at facilitating children's communication with peers and tutors and restoring hope for a positive future through drama. It was implemented gradually over a period of 6 months. The research team consisted of three academic teachers and eleven volunteer pre-graduate students from the Department of Early Childhood Education who were trained in

Drama techniques and didactic approaches to second language learning. Twenty children (6-12 years old) participated in the project, eleven boys, nine girls, of Syrian (Arabic and Kurdish) origin. The children's sociolinguistic profile was that of emergent multilinguals (García & Kleifgen, 2010); Kurdish or Arabic were their first languages along with some very basic skills in the English and Greek language learned during their refugee route.

The project aimed to:

- > Provide real and meaningful situations where the second language can be acquired,
- > Develop refugee children's communicative skills,
- > Help them to develop positive feelings towards learning and schooling,
- > Promote children's mutual collaboration through peer and group activities,
- > Develop children's' creativity

Drama interventions were part of the regular school day. The students took part in eleven weekly 90-minute sessions. Within a safe and respectful atmosphere, all the interventions were organized along the same lines over 11 weeks (table 1), although students' involvement and the topic complexity gradually increased as participants felt more comfortable and confident about their communication abilities.

### **2.1. Procedure**

Each week, the research team introduced a topic which was related to the children's everyday life and facilitated their basic communicative needs in the Greek language. Activities included interactional tasks between children, university students and teachers. The implemen-

WEEK	Activities Children are expected to:	DRAMA TECHNIQUES
Week 1	Introduce each other using all available resources (languages, gestures, movements)	Warm up games-getting to know each other-trust games. Use of a persona doll (ELENI) as mediator
Week 2	Greet/salute in many languages Use gestures to convey meaning Reproduce short sequences with constant rhythm, involving salutations and names	Role play, puppet improvisation Use of a persona doll (ELENI) as mediator
Week 3	Talk about myself, my family and my life history. Guess another person's identity through pantomime and role playing	Role play, improvisation, puppets improvisation
Week 4	Express feelings through language, body movements, gestures, facial expressions	Pantomime, Freeze frames Thought tracking, Working with masks
Week 5	Introduce a puppet character, invent physical and other characteristics –age, gender, family, likes/dislikes etc.) Make a story with the puppet Improvise a story with the puppet	Warm up games, Use of a persona doll (Kostas) as mediator, Puppetry making (make a puppet from recyclable materials) and improvisation/animation
Week 6	Talk about present/future plans	Teacher in role, pantomime, Role play
Week 7	Make short stories with animals	Dramatization, Freeze Frames, Thought tracking, Improvisation
Week 8	Narrate and dramatize a story Verbally express understanding of characters and situations) Describe events in chronological order	Story Telling, Dramatization, Freeze frames, Action clip
Week 9	Improvise a collectively made story Ask questions about certain situations Describe events in chronological order	Teacher in role, dramatization, Freeze frames, Puppetry Story telling
Week 10	Improvise certain scenes of the story "The Journey of Halima" in the children's language repertoire.	Improvisation, Dramatization, Puppetry, Tableau vivant, Thought tracking
Week 11	Perform in front of an audience in the Camp	Dramatization

Table 1: Content of activities.

tation process involved the application of drama techniques, such as Role play, Freeze frames, Puppetry, Persona Doll Method, Improvisation, Teacher in role, Pantomime, Stories Dramatization etc. (Alkistis, 2008; Baldwin, 2008).

The use of two Persona Dolls (Kostas and Eleni) as mediators facilitated the communication process. They came into the classroom as friends and gradually a bond was built among them and the children. Dolls and children used Greek, some English and a few Arabic words to communicate. Accordingly, the facilitators introduced different kind of puppets (rod puppets, finger puppets etc.) and simple animating techniques were practiced in Greek. Puppets were used in themes such as "introduce myself", "talk about my family" (see table 1). In the same scope, children created new characters and animated them in small improvisations. Additionally, the children worked in animating small stories (e.g. "The red riding hood"). They jointly prepared the oral script, they divided it into different scenes, they practiced and performed in front of the classroom using all available resources.

Similarly, after reading a fable (e.g. The Hare and the Tortoise) we used many drama techniques such as 'tableau vivant' technique (still images, thought tracking), in order to unfold the story. By all means, many icebreakers, activities and games were introduced, strengthening group dynamics and encouraging creativity. Respectively, during the role-plays the students engaged in specific aspects of a character e.g. job (cooker, painter, hairdresser, teacher, etc.) and interacted in a given context in order to achieve a specific communication goal. During this

## The teacher and the university students assumed the role of guides facilitating the learning process and encouraging the students to be creative and to speak out their own point of view, ideas and feelings.

process, the children were encouraged to keep notes, in any language they wanted, to draw signs and labels in order to use them in the improvisations or any other drama activities.

In most cases, drawing and painting, music and art were also used to support the drama actions. All the techniques used provided fruitful instances for developing second language learning and creativity and facilitated students' performance skills in storytelling and character development.

The teacher and the university students assumed the role of guides facilitating the learning process and encouraging the students to be creative and to speak out their own point of view, ideas and feelings. The university students participated weekly in groups of 4 at a time, taking on the role of animators, along with the researchers, dividing students into groups of 3-4. Many times a student would personally work with a particular student who was having some kind of difficulty.

In addition, most of the activities were conducted in pairs or groups and involved physical movement within the classroom. Sometimes group dynamics led to problems, since the children were not accustomed to working in pairs and groups.

### 2.2. Data Gathering Tool

At the end of the project semi-structured interviews with the children were used as a tool to evaluate its implementation. Interviews (20 minutes approximately) were held in Greek and Arabic (with the help of a mediator) in a quiet environment in the camp and were conducted individually with all participants. Chil-

dren were also encouraged to respond using all their linguistic resources (e.g. mixing Arabic and Greek, some words in English).

#### *Evaluation of the program*

##### *Feelings about the program (general evaluation)*

Our aim was to listen carefully to the children's voices explicitly referring to the project, interrelated within the context of the effectiveness of Drama Pedagogy as a multimodal approach in a newly arrived refugee students.

Regarding interaction with their classmates and the research team, the children expressed positive feelings and enthusiasm.

S20: "I love all the girls [university students], we played a lot with them...they helped us"

S10: "I love being someone else and play with Aya in the puppet theatre"

Concerning their relationships with their classmates the children mentioned that during the drama session they co-operated effectively, in a joyful and enthusiastic environment. The collaboration during drama sessions, the group work and the final performance in the Camp made them really proud of themselves:

S4: "I really enjoyed our drama play at the end of the school year...all together we showed to our families what we did in the Greek school"

S18: "I was so proud for the theatre play in front of our families...they applauded us!!" [they performed in front of their families in the camp]

The strong bond, which was developed during the sessions, the identity affirmation, the feeling of acceptance and trust were of the outmost importance:

In general, students asserted that drama activities provided them with more opportunities for personal investment in classroom communication than “typical” school activities.

S17: “I was eager to meet them [the university students] each week! They were very supportive and they played with us...we laughed together during theatre, they encouraged us not to be shy...we learned so much from them, we enjoyed the project!”

#### *Languaging-communication*

In general, students asserted that drama activities provided them with more opportunities for personal investment in classroom communication than “typical” school activities:

S1: “very nice...it was better than writing or reading all the time ...I like being someone else...and make puppets and play and laugh”

However, they admitted that at the beginning of the project it was quite awkward and uncomfortable for them to participate in such “open” courses in which all felt free to express themselves contrastingly to their former school experiences:

S9: “at first I didn’t want to go to the theatre class but...then I enjoyed”

S5: “We didn’t use to play in this way at school in Syria...Teacher were very strict.” Nevertheless, they gradually felt more relaxed and enjoyed their theatrical “transformations”, their performance skills and the characters’ development. Additionally, they were eager for the following sessions:

S7: “I want to play theater every week! I love puppets, I like play with Kosta and Eleni (Persona dolls). It’s very nice”

S16: “I want to play theatre every day, not only once a week”

S2: “it’s a pity that it ended...please come in the camp during the summer and play with us again”

Meanwhile they mentioned that throughout drama play negotiation of meaning was developed and communication was achieved in their language repertoire. They emphasized that during drama conventions language practices in many languages were facilitated:

S7: “Even though I don’t speak Greek well, they understood what I was saying... through pantomime, movements... some English, some Kurdish...some Greek. We used all languages together...it was fun” They were also proud of their performance in the Greek language and self-confident to communicate in Greek in several occasions:

S10: “I can speak Greek better now...I can play with my puppets in Greek...”

S1: “I teach my mom Greek words...and I understand better now...”

### **3. Conclusion and discussion**

In this paper, we argue, based on the data, that the multimodal nature of drama could be an effective practice in refugee children’s education (Dunn et al., 2012; Ntelioglou, 2011; Papadopoulou, Vitsou, Gana, in press).

Communication skills, cognitive, affective and psychological skills are the primary skills acquired with the drama techniques in teaching newly arrived refugee students. These skills are followed by self-expression in many modes and languages, imagination and improvisation, creative thinking, self-confidence,

socialization, critical thinking, problem solving, assuming responsibility. Children had the opportunity to use their native language(s) in school and to engage in dialogues where all languages (Arabic, Kurdish, English and Greek) were accepted and used. They emphasized that during drama conventions language practices in many language were facilitated. Negotiation of meaning was developed and communication was achieved in their language repertoire. Additionally, facial and body expressions, gestures and gaze were used to convey meaning. Students' prior experiences were brought into the surface and they were emotionally empowered. Moreover, the dissemination of the knowledge they acquired during the project to their parents was of most important and empowered also their identities. Extensive use of translanguaging, which was reinforced by drama techniques (Garcia & Wei, 2014), increased children's involvement in the interaction and empowered them as language users. Consequently, their identity was

strengthened and their self-image was improved. Furthermore, they enriched their vocabulary in Greek, improved their listening skills, their ability for storytelling through drama, and their strategies for interpreting new words. Accordingly, they developed empathy, cultivated their intercultural skills and strengthened their identities. Students worked in groups, which means that they were more independent, confident and creative (Souki, 2019). Alongside they were emotionally connected with the research team. One of the limitations of this research pertains to some student's hesitation in participating in drama activities, mainly in the beginning due to lack of previous experience with drama as well as the non-systematic attendance of all children to the school. To sum up, despite the limitations of the research, it seems obvious that drama education apart from being a tool for the social-emotional support of children with refugee or migrant experience, it could be fruitfully used to facilitate second language learning.

## Bibliography

Alkistis (2008). *Mavri agelada-aspri agelada, Dramatiki Techni stin Ekpaidefsi kai Diapolitismikotita* [Black cow-white cow, Drama in Education and Interculturality]. Athens: Topos.

Baldwin, P. (2008). *The primary drama handbook: a practical guide for teaching assistants and teachers new to drama*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Bengochea, A., Sembiente, S. F., & Gort, M. (2018). An emergent bilingual child's multimodal choices in sociodramatic play. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 18(1), 38–70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468798417739081>.

Cumming, S. & Visser, J. (2009). Using art with vulnerable children. *Support for Learning*, 24(4), 151–157.

Dunn, J., Bundy, P. & Woodrow, N. (2012). Combining drama pedagogy with digital technologies to support the language learning needs of newly arrived refugee children: a

classroom case study. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 17 (3), 477–499.

García, O. & Kleifgen, J. (2010). *Educating Emergent Bilinguals. Policies, Programs and Practices for English Language Learners*. New York: Teachers College Press.

García, O. & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

INEE (2009). *Good Practice Guides for Emergency Education, Inclusive Education for Children at Risk*. Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies

Ntelioglou B. Y., (2011) 'But why do I have to take this class?' The mandatory drama-ESL class and multiliteracies pedagogy, *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 16:4, 595–615, DOI: 10.1080/13569783.2011.617108.

Ntelioglou B. Y., Fannin J, Montanera, M., & Cummins, J. (2014). A multilingual and

multimodal approach to literacy teaching and learning in urban education: a collaborative inquiry project in an inner city elementary school. *Front. Psychol.* 5:533. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00533

Papadopoulou, M., Vitsou, M., Gana, E., (2018). "Me lemoni": Communication practices of children refugees in a project of Literacy through Drama. Oral presentation in the conference "Crossroads of Languages and Cultures" Crete, 1-3 June, 2018.

Souki, El, G., (2019). "Using the Visual Arts to Support the Development of Young Refugee Children: A Puppet-Making Workshop." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2019. [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/art\\_design\\_theses/249](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/art_design_theses/249).

UNHCR, (2017). *Situation on Greek islands still grim despite speeded transfers (briefing notes)*. Retrieved from: <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2017/12/5a3ccd394/situation-greek-islands-still-grim-despite-speeded-transfers.html>