

## The Role of the Empathic Function of Literature in Dismantling Stereotypes and Eliminating Discrimination in the Classroom

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### Abstract

The coexistence of students in the classroom from different cultural backgrounds is a challenge. Literature as a cultural product may contribute to the cultivation of intercultural empathy and acceptance of diversity in various ways. This study examines how literature may contribute to the treatment of issues related to stereotypes, gender discrimination, and how it may eliminate prejudices in the classroom. Initially, through the bibliographic review, the effect of literature on the psycho-emotional development of the individual, the strengthening of resilience and on the development of emotional intelligence is investigated as a key element for the development of healthy interpersonal relationships. Then, this study presents the results of an action research that utilized literature to break stereotypes in a pluralistic class. The action research took place at schools in Chania (Crete, Greece), and it highlights the empathic function of literature in removing stereotypes and discrimination in the classroom through various experiential activities and cooperative role play. Literature cultivates empathy and students may get into “others' shoes”, accepting diversity. Through structured literature-based programs, a teacher may cultivate intercultural understanding and empathy, promoting human rights and enhancing the learners as future citizens with an inclusive and humanitarian attitude.

### Keywords

Intercultural Education, Intercultural Empathy, Acceptance, Understanding

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The global transformations have led to corresponding transformations at all levels including education. The refugee and the intense migration flow, the current conditions as well as the international conjunctures have brought about changes in the student map of the school units, which is characterized by great diversity and heterogeneity in characteristics and potential (Valiandi and Neophitou 15). This pluralism in classes is a challenge because in our schools in Chania (Crete, Greece) we have students from different cultural and social backgrounds, with different religious and political ideals, different abilities, and capacities. Every teacher should face up to this diversity in the spirit of a solidarity pedagogy with the aim of acceptance, empathy, and understanding. Intercultural and inclusive education in these environments is a necessity aimed at better inclusion of all students and responding to their needs, empowering them through various techniques, strategies, and practices (Salend 12). Above all, inclusive education tries to bridge cultural and ideological gaps, removing discrimination and deconstructing prejudices, emphasizing empathy, interaction, and cultural exchanges (Angelides and Chatzisotiriou 3).

Schools as a microcosm of society have embraced this cultural, social, and mental diversity, trying to respond to the guarantee of equal rights and the undeniable right of the individual to equal opportunities, but also to the creation of a humanized society where the diversity of ways of expression will be favored (Pachi 8; Le Roux 39). School is the best environment for cultivating values and principles of an intercultural and inclusive approach. This effort presupposes the prominent and very important role of the teacher. Considering that any culture change may occur through education and training, the school as a socializing institution assumes a crucial role. Of course, developing a national policy aimed at this goal as well as investing resources and staff is a necessity.

Literature and art, in general, are means to achieve the cultivation of intercultural consciousness, empathy, and understanding. Many writers today, influenced by the changes in society, dare to capture in their works phenomena and situations that result from these transformations. Particular phenomena related to the multiculturalism and pluralism of society need special management and treatment and nowadays have become of great concern topic for many writers. The image of the "Other" has been captured in several literary works not only in terms of the dominant culture but also in terms of the people entering a country. There is a tendency observed in modern times, enlightening

foreigners, which is inspired by the principles of the Declaration of Human Rights and the importance of respect and solidarity, a trend that is also observed in the field of literature.

The role of Literature is important not only because of the aesthetics but also because of the emotional impact it has on the reading public. Besides, Literature as a cultural product of the societies may contribute in various ways in the direction of cultivating empathy and intercultural understanding, and also to the deconstruction or strengthening of stereotypes and ideological prejudices. Moreover, a literary text as a carrier of the ideology of the creator, the reader and the context, reflects the reality and the relationships that are formed in the social environment (Maniatis 228). In the light of a Culturally Awareness Pedagogy (Gay 50), practices that may be adopted by teachers, vary. Especially literature with its empathic power, its unifying discourse, its universal character and its pluralistic identity can contribute in this direction. Many scholars argue that children's books can be a window into the world, a means of understanding ourselves and others without barriers. In other words, literature with its multicultural and universal dimension may embrace the whole world, become a field of convergence and coexistence. Although the term ‘multicultural’ vary in view depending on the field and the visual approach of the scholars (Gavriilidou 303; Politis and Maniatis 4), nevertheless, for the majority of them it refers to the negotiation of acceptance of various forms of diversity (Kanatsouli 91). Cai (2008) emphasizes the threefold function that multicultural literature can assume: a) as inclusive with the acceptance of as many cultures as possible, on an equal and non-discriminatory basis; b) as a policy with an emphasis on national and gender prejudices; and c) as multicultural, treating each person as a multicultural being. This study presents an action research which is held in schools of Chania of Crete during a period when many refugees arrived seeking a safe place to live. Many of their children were accepted from the regional schools where they founded houses to rent. Teachers had many challenges to face: the acceptance of the native, the adjustment of these families, the language, etc.

## **Methodology**

The study presents a review of the role of literature in cultivating acceptance and multiplicity. In this study, an action research model was also employed at schools in Chania (Crete, Greece), and it highlights the empathic function of literature in removing stereotypes and discrimination in the classroom through various experiential activities and cooperative role play. For creating a more hospitable environment we tried to sensitize the other students in order to cultivate empathy and made them ‘be in the shoes of others’ and understand them better. In this project, I argue that literature with its empathetic power has the potential to promote diversity and acceptance of the other. As a Consultant of Education, I invited all the teachers who had the chance to teach in a pluralistic class (n= 45) and we decided to implement a certain program that exploits stories from Children Literature in order to bring all students together, to know each other, to share experience, to get acquainted. The program exploited books with specific thematic and contained certain stages:

- Storytelling
- Teamwork - role play
- Children's drawing
- Writing experience (diary)

- Discussion
- Activities cultivating social and emotional skills
- Reflection

Each teacher kept a diary and there were many reflecting meetings where experiences and ideas were being exchanged about the program.

### **The power of literature stories in the cultivation of attitudes, morals, and perceptions**

Bruno Bettelheim emphasizes the contribution of the tales to the psychological maturation of the child and the meaning of his world, while many other scientists from various scientific fields emphasize the multidimensional contribution of stories to the psychosocial development of the future citizen(51). Stories and tales satisfy the timeless and universal need of the individual to express in a symbolic word the desires, fears, hopes, passions, dreams, and anxieties of life, negotiating everything that concerns him and sharing them. Literature helps the child to mature, to prepare for the small and big changes in his life, according to Rowshan, provides him with “solutions” that fit the way he thinks and experiences the world and that is why stories are so convincing for it(44).

At the level of pedagogical utilization, literature stories can be a springboard for practicing and learning in all the human senses, for comprehensive and holistic cultivation of education that combines a quality field of knowledge and aesthetic education(Wason-Ellam 285). In addition, reading and telling a story enhances language development, leads to skills in recognizing forms and structures of language and its wider cultivation. During the narration of a literature story, two very basic mechanisms are activated according to Von Franz: the mechanism of projection and identification(99). The identification and emotional involvement with the heroes is the element that motivates the students to further engage with the story. Students are identified with the hero, take part in the adventure and problem solving, are emotionally involved, which equips them with the knowledge that will allow them to activate them in similar situations(Randi and Lyn 665). The emotional processes that take place at that moment, operate on a symbolic-imaginary level and play an important role in building their psycho-emotional experience. Through the life-giving and filtering filter of the imagination and the senses, children approach the world, acquire socialized thinking and boost their self-confidence (Anagnostopoulou 90). The reason why literature is the most beloved, attractive, enjoyable and excellent pedagogical tool with multiple benefits in the hands of teachers with wide possibilities and perspectives becomes clear.

Literature is especially useful when used in the inclusion of children with and without educational difficulties, as it contributes to the cultivation of emotional and social intelligence. Action programs and organizations that have used it, record significant pedagogical benefits. More specifically, it has been investigated that the literature stories contribute to the cultivation of empathy and acceptance in the classroom (Mello, 2001) with significant benefits in the development of language intelligence, the expression of emotions, and the establishment of a healthy relational dynamics in the school context, cultivating social and emotional intelligence (Ntoulia 11).

In addition, stories have been used to strengthen the mental resilience of children from vulnerable social groups (Heath et al. 31; Mayaba and Wood 15; Montgomery and Maunders 44; Wood et al. 33; Theron et al. 501), while in the field of special education it has been used for psycho-pedagogical purposes in children with various difficulties (Crimmens 41; Doulami and Antoniou 32; Karnezi and Tierney 15;

Kourkoutas 490). Of particular interest is the use of literature as a creative counseling tool for children (Bradley et al. 51; Pehrsson, 278).

Storytelling, whether in the form of oral, pictorial, written, or cinematic means, contributes to the exchange of experiences from one person to another with therapeutic consequences. The contribution of digital storytelling to the adoption of healthy behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs by adolescents is important, allowing them to learn healthier ways of expressing their emotions (Sawyer and Willis 271; Veach and Gladding 80). Storytelling strengthens the belief of children in their ability to build their own personality despite external adversity, internal conflicts or deadlocks they experience.

Stories and literature in general contribute to forging healthy interpersonal and social relationships at a time when class diversity is a reality and the student map has changed significantly due to the particular socio-economic and cultural conditions that have been created. Through programs and experiential activities that have as a starting point a story, opportunities are created to talk about emotions but also to work as a team on the importance of *sharing and belonging, collaborating, cultivating emotional and social skills* necessary in the life of the individual. With the proper utilization of the ideas, symbolic representations and experiences of the real and the imaginary, which are inherent in literature stories, an appropriate framework is created, which enhances the social interaction of the child, with the aim of his cooperation and participation in social actions for equal and democratic education. Literature, therefore, can be a valuable aid for the cognitive, linguistic, sensory-motor, socio-emotional cultivation, and comprehensive development of the child, providing opportunities for equal participation and inclusion (Rangila 51).

This paper aims, among other things, to present the results of the implementation of a structured intervention program aimed at developing inclusive practices through the use of literature stories to develop healthy interpersonal relationships, democratic attitudes and social skills (cooperation, participation, empathy, team spirit, conflict management) in pluralistic classes. Our main goal was the cultivation of acceptance of the different by all members of a school unit through the cultivation of empathy and understanding. It was decided to implement an inclusion program with the cooperation of all involved (principals, general and special education teachers, school psychologists, consultants, students, parents). For this purpose, we choose specific books in which stereotypes and prejudices were detected in order to work as a team to deconstruct these misperceptions and develop healthy and more democratic attitudes with respect to Man.

### **Literary representations of the “Other”, the “Foreign”, the “Different”**

The literary representations of the ‘*other*’, of the ‘*foreign*’, of the ‘*different*’ in the modern age, are of renewed interest, as many writers negotiate the question of stereotypes and identities from the point of view of the “Other”. Alexandra Mitsiali has written, among other books, three very important samples of intercultural literature stories that refer to the treatment of the immigrant, the foreigner, non-religious, who live and coexist in a society different from their own. Readers in these books observe different manifestations of multicultural management and coping. In the book *I Promise*, through a first-person narrative, the bitter feelings of the hero-narrator are highlighted. The hero accepts an indifferent and disparaging/alienating behavior due to his origin and living conditions. With an ingenious narrative technique, that of a letter, the author puts the narrator-hero to make a flashback to his previous life in the homeland so that the

reader can discover that in the end, no country is without responsibility in the way it treats the foreigner, no matter how much it supports democratic principles and values. The hero is a Greek child forced to live in a foreign land and accepts indifference and alienation as if he were invisible. Keeping fresh the memories from his life in his homeland, he tries to cope with the loss of his favorite habits and face the heartless behavior of the host country beyond the adverse conditions of misery and living. Despite his sadness, he finds the courage to be strong and fight to change his future.

In the second book, *I Want To Tell You The Truth*, the author defends the child immigrant who is forced to work and go to school. It is touching the initiative of little Daphne to defend her classmate, knowing his secret, fighting the established stereotypes. She opposes the unjust treatment of Emiglè just because he is a foreigner. She defends the truth. The fact that defense of justice and equal treatment comes from a small child, a girl who restores the truth with honesty and courage, setting an example of how we should defend human beings. It is a deeply emotional book that changes the way we interpret reality and illuminates other perspectives, regarding our multicultural readiness. Finally, in the book *My name is Niloufer*, the author captures the important role of the teacher in managing diversity in the classroom. The story refers to a charismatic teacher who knows how to pair diverse elements uniquely. The clever trick of putting students searching for a story behind their name highlights the richness of diversity and the fact that in the end, people are more united by similarities than differences. This is a book that praises the value and contribution of art and plays in applying intercultural education, but also highlights the importance of cultural osmosis and exchange between individuals equally. Narrative techniques, illustration, the lack of didacticism, the prominent realism are key components of quality intercultural literature that aims to cultivate acceptance of the other, understanding, social awareness, highlighting pluralism and different perspectives, set emphasis on the humanistic approach, and the realization of critical emancipation, of a mature and sensitive approach and understanding.

Giota Alexandrou's book *Harris and Faris* is moving in the same direction. *Harris and Faris* is a book that states that friendship knows no boundaries, language restrictions, stereotypes, or prejudices, but can be developed due to the purity of heart and sincere humanitarian interest. The book detects fears, stereotypes, entanglements of a dominant culture, but also illuminates the attempt to react and raise the voice of those who dare to be fair. Little Harry, the teacher, Harris's mother are bright examples who take action and initiative. All these books praise diversity.

Dealing with foreigners in general, whether they are victims of war or economic migrants many modern children's literature books 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 354, 62, 73). The concept of the foreigner and especially the refugee in most books is captured with various narrative techniques and symbols, allegories, realistic descriptions, pictorial depictions, contexts, boxed narratives, use of terminology that give the story a special cultural dimension so that fiction becomes the vehicle for the interpretation of reality and the renegotiation of values. According to Alexandra Zervou, in most books the mood of understanding of the other and the promotion of coexistence is encouraged, overcoming phobias and prejudices. Many books dare to propose, indirectly, a national and individual identity that is not aggressively defined but tends to be enshrined peacefully in a polyphonic and multicultural world (Zervou 11).

Another great book in terms of breaking stereotypes, identities and distinctions is the book by Veronica Kosi with the equally excellent illustration by Rebecca Galera, *The Big Wolf And The Red Fairy*. The story deals with the creation of a friendship between two seemingly unfamiliar and unmatched beings, lonely and marginalized due to their disability (the wolf is not evil and cunning but good, with mental retardation and Little Red Riding Hood is blind). Two heroes, who due to their disability are not accepted but rejected by society, seek refuge in the darkness of a forest. That story illuminates the loneliness of the heroes and highlights their perspective with realism. The author's intention to capture the difference in its proper dimension is evident, as it is happen in Gene Willis' book, *Susan Laughs*. The same tendency can be found in a plethora of books that deal with the hero's disability or difficulties, illuminating the stereotypical reactions and feelings of the environment such as *Jesus Bets*, *The War That Saved My Life*, *My Brother Is Hunting Dinosaurs*.

### **Changing attitudes with Literature as a vehicle**

Pluralism and diversity in modern classrooms dictate a systematic, alternative and different approach that will not be limited to the teaching of the host country and the integration of minority populations (Govaris 20). Reforms are needed based on the fundamental respect for human rights, on the "change" of attitudes and perceptions and on brave reform proposals at the level of curricula that will be inspired by the intercultural spirit of cooperation, solidarity, coexistence, acceptance, and inclusion (Oslick and Lowery 11). Literature can contribute in this direction, capturing reality and illuminating the various manifestations of diversity, thanks to the universality of its character (Akritopoulos 205).

The power of storytelling in combination with experiential activities and techniques can be an important means and pedagogical tool in managing diversity but also in cultivating empathy of all students, including native ones (Artzanidou et al 11; Papadatos 22). The realistic textual narrative, the accompanying illustration, which most of the time also tells the story in its own way, the exploitation of music or visual arts, the role-playing games, projects are 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.

In our program after storytelling in the most suitable way in order to respond to all students' needs even those who didn't understand the Greek language (through translated children's literature or bilingual presentation), we involved students in differentiated experiential playful activities such as drawing, frozen images, the corridor of consciousness, the chair of truth, critical analysis of works of art in combination with texts in the context of a transformative critical analysis and so many others activities that helped children to deal with stereotypes and prejudices through active techniques and experiential games, starting meaningful discussion for coexistence and inclusion in many interpretive levels depending on the developmental level of the children.

A critical point to the successful implementation of the program was the criteria for the selection of the books. We chose books that favor the critical emancipatory negotiation of the story through the examination of the narrative constructions of the represented reality (Kalogirou and Karagianni 38) and that allow the deconstruction of the anti-stereotypes of dominant cultures (Maniatis 225), encouraging at the same time the free expression of views and experiences that will contribute to the search for truth and real causes of their existence. We chose literature stories that don't undermine

pluralism but become the vehicle for students to explore the value of any diversity (Kanatsouli 200), assess their attitude toward established perceptions through scripts, redefine their values, to cultivate empathy through active experiential practices (such as role-playing), to learn to respect and value the different with faith in the wealth that this difference has to offer and finally to gain intercultural understanding through the acquaintance of the other. Most students will be able to make sense of their world and get to know themselves since, as Proust argued, the reader is primarily a reader of himself.

### **Results of the action research and the structured interventions**

During the program we decided to keep diaries, writing down thoughts, obstacles, experiences, observed changes in the attitudes of the children. Taking part in this action research, we all had expectations such as cultivating empathy, understanding, and acceptance among students in the whole class a chance to cultivate morals and principles according to Human Rights. It is proved that reading a literary book is equivalent to a journey of self-knowledge, a journey of discovery and enjoyment. All the participants had the chance to think and reflect, engage cognitively and emotionally in the stories, experience situations, discover themselves, search, explore, analyze, judge, penetrate internal aspects, to make multiple interpretations. In this way every one becomes part of each story, suffers and sympathizes, discovers other ways of thinking and interacting, comes in contact with other mentalities, perceptions, positions, ideas, opinions, and forms his identity (Akritopoulos 201).

Literature, through the emotions and conciliation that it offers, is an ideal means of cultivating intercultural understanding and empathy, promoting humanity. It provides food for thought and a chance for creativity to teachers and students. It is a vehicle to dream and enjoy, to unlock new doors and to travel on new paths made from the materials of imagination and dream. 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, to feel. At the same time, through reading activities, it is cultivated a climate of cooperation and teamwork and values such as respect, equality, acceptance. The majority of the participants felt active members of their classroom, equal members who can freely and respectfully express ideas and their deeper thoughts, felt accepted to interact and respected. Teachers observed a significant change in their student's attitudes and behavior. They noted down some words while asking their children. We indicatively present some opinions:

Amelie, 11 years old

"I like this class because something different is constantly happening in it. The other classes are like being stuck on the ground. In this class, the teacher really knows how to travel. It is like managing a really good travel agency with rich surprises and everything related".

John, 10 years old

"Every day is another day, full of surprises, games and joy".

Teacher

It was difficult at first. I felt panic but due to our team, our frequent meetings and mutual reflections and follow-ups, things have changed. I felt calmer and so I began to notice the joy and change in everyone's mood. Our class tied us up. We are now one.



## Conclusions

Literature is an ideal vehicle and a great pedagogical means for teachers to cultivate in-depth human values and feelings. It offers students the chance to discover their identity, allowing them to explore and journey without any cost. Through structured literature-based programs, teachers can cultivate ‘‘filanagnosia’’ and offer reading activities in which students may act, travel, dream, share experiences and ideas, cultivate morals and respect, and above all, the love for reading. This action research proved that literature may contribute to intercultural understanding. Empathy derived from stories creates feelings and moves people to think more compassionately. Through literature, values are forged and critical readers are developed with strength and courage for the challenges of life. Tales cultivate emotional intelligence which is necessary to understand others, to get ‘‘into their shoes’’, to understand their position, needs, or feelings, and to coexist equally, fairly, and democratically. The power of literature is in empathy and the inner discoveries and explorations of all aspects of life. In this way, literature has a great empathic function in changing attitudes, opinions, perceptions. Approached this way, it is a great pedagogical tool in dismantling stereotypes and removing discrimination in the classroom in the context of an emancipated critical pedagogy

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