

# Developing Positive Attitudes towards Reading Literature and the Role of School Library: An Application in Greek Secondary Education

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## Abstract

The paper presents an educational approach of modern literature in a student reading group based on cross-curricular principles and it attempts to propose a specific framework for reorganizing teaching goals and methods with the aim to promote School Library as an educational tool. The lesson plan was implemented in a Model Junior High School of Attica in the second term of the 2019-2020 school year and concerns a reading community of adolescent readers. It is a form of educational application of literary theories and involves collaborative writing and creative expression during a dialogic reading of a whole novel in the School Library. The design is based on the connection of the teaching of literature in the classroom and its expansion in the educational environment of a library, even with the deficiencies observed in Greek School Libraries. The paper supports a more holistic approach of literature in secondary education, applying creative reading and writing techniques. The results of the approach reveal the extent to which enhancing the recreational nature of reading fosters reading motivation in young readers. In addition, it highlights the contribution of the School Library to the cultivation of a more positive attitude of students towards the literature.

**Keywords:** Literature, Reading Communities, Reader-response theory, School Libraries, Creative Writing.

## 1. Introduction

The paper presents a different form of teaching literature, actively involving the School Library space as a valuable means to develop a more positive attitude of student-readers towards the fiction. At the same time, the use of the School library in a Model Junior High School in Attica, during the school year of 2019-2020 reveals the structural deficiencies of Greek School Libraries (Arvaniti, 2008). However, it points out the benefits that students get when the reading and interpretation of literature is not done in the school classroom, but in the School Library. The approach mentions an existing and important dimension of the school community library, which is to methodologically complement with creative processes the reading response that begins in the schoolroom (Germanos, 2001).

At the same time, it shows how educational models and techniques can be combined to develop a love of reading to adolescent readers. The aim is for members of the reading community to develop internal motivation for reading literature, to collaboratively approach the literary text as an aesthetic object, and to feel how important the library is as a social and educational space (Malafantis, 2005; Kopsida-Vrettou, 2011). Since School Libraries are under-functioning and not managed by professional librarians, the guidance of a professional librarian was requested, although, despite the valuable help, the gap created by his absence was obvious (Polemi-Todoulou, 2011). The following were defined as the educational objectives of the lesson plan. More specifically, the students as readers:

- To feel how literature mirrors every cultural system, era and social change (Frydaki, 2003)
- To read literary works which maintain a connection with our era through their aesthetic value (Iser, 2013; Kelepouri & Hontolidou, 2013)
- To strengthen the skills of interpreting literary texts and develop their linguistic expression (Heath, 2007)

To collaborate creatively with each other and discover the beauty of literature and the book: as a material object and content (Kragler, 2000; Bruner, 1960)

To develop communication skills through their active participation in heterogeneous groups with defined goals and roles (Polemi-Todoulou, 2011)

To feel that library spaces are not sterile and alienated from real life, but can provide opportunities for learning and creative expression that are both beneficial and enjoyable (Tilke, 1998)

The educational framework used constitutes a combination of concepts, methodological tools and educational techniques. A key factor in the implementation of the project is for the students-readers to maintain their reading motivation for a significant period of time in an environment that was not sufficiently detached from the routine of school life (Malafantis, 2005). In this sense, love of reading in adolescents is associated with the gradual development of an attitude towards literature, as it describes a complex process of deeper and associative processing of different literary genres. The facilitator's role (educator) in this process is to encourage their willingness to read literary texts in such a way that reading will enhance motivation for re-reading (Cooper, George & Sanders, 1994). This finding is based on the principle that humans tend to desire more what we understand to be useful to us, and at the same time, we respond satisfactorily to something we find pleasurable as well as interesting (Karakitsios, 2011). The characteristics of the group of students that this approach was addressed to are: a. its members are familiar with collaborative learning, b. they have been engaged in creative expression activities in a cooperative manner. (Xochelis, 2002) and c. they have expressed their intention to participate in activities that enhance interaction and creativity in a School Library environment (Bruner, 1960; Mastromanolis, 2001).

The members of the reading group consisted of 22 students (14 years old) with satisfactory performance in Language and Literature. The selected literary work (see below) and the teaching activities would have a positive response even among older students (High School), as long as they displayed similar characteristics in terms of reading readiness (Kragler, 2000).

## 2. Methodology

The educational design combines the application of the reading-response model (Rosenblatt, 1994; Fish, 1980) with the Hermeneutic circle (Makkreel & Rodi, 1989). It engages inquiry-based learning with creative expression exercises and cooperative learning play (Smith, 1973; Michailidis, 2018). For the creative activities, a descriptive assessment is applied and the existing collection of the library, as well as the one of the Municipal Library, is used, as the students-readers were granted the permission to borrow books. Creative discourse production activities are embedded in all phases of the process. By utilising the transactional model (Rosenblatt, 1994) within the reader-response model, three phases are proposed: a. preparation and initial response, b. perfecting the response, c. extensions. This lesson plan proposed -based on the selection of the specific literary text- extends to 11 teaching hours, but it can be flexible depending on the book selected.

In such an undertaking, participatory and questioning methods that develop interaction can be combined with heuristic methods (creating short tasks) and active methods (combining action and speech) (Kuhn, 1991; Kokkos, 1999). In any case, such an educational process needs to be accepted by the reading community and co-decided on the individual stages, in order to mobilize the participants and achieve the necessary atmosphere of creative expression (Gournas, 2011; Chrysafidis, 2002).

It is important at this point to clarify what is defined and how the concept of love of reading is approached today and its relationship with creative writing in adolescent readers (Maragoudakis, 1994). Since creative thinking means both criticism as well as originality in approaching a situation, while critical ability refers to reflective logical functions, but also to redefining interpretations of pre-existing structures, it is perceived that creativity and critical ability interact in the context of reading encouragement (Kurtz & Schober, 2001). The emphasis is placed on the ability of the literary texts themselves to resist unilateral interpretations, a fact that has its basis in literary theory, while it is a crucial factor for the activation of young readers (Apostolidou, Kaplani & Hondolidou, 2002).

The above findings are related to issues of theory and educational approach to literature as a mental and psychological expression of the subject with various individual and social connotations.

Thus, the young reader's contact with literary texts contributes to the development of different skills (Malafantis, 2005). In addition, creative writing is also used as it is considered a key factor in cultivating self-motivation within the reading group and it also assists in their socialization in the school community (Katsiki-Givalou, 2008). Finally, it takes into account that the development of a love of reading is also supported by the reconfiguration of the classroom or the use of another space, so that the whole reading group feels that they are getting out of the usual rhythm of the school class, which will help to achieve the appropriate learning atmosphere (Xochelis, 2002). Again the main purpose is related to relaxing the rules and reducing the stress of school life in a space as suitable as possible for cooperative learning (Kanakis, 1987; Grosdos, 2014).

### 3. Discussion

During the first phase (first 3 hours) through a collective discussion, a short introduction is made to the methods and criteria for selecting works and the preferences and reading experiences of the members of the reading community are mentioned (Rosenblatt, 1994). The discussion took place inside the School Library, where teenage readers could move freely in the space and be inspired for the selection of literary texts. The basic criteria were defined as: a. the selected book should be from the collection of the School Library, while they could also choose from a series of books brought by the facilitator/educator and placed next to the shelves, b. each group had to choose only one book, so that in the plenary it could be discussed and decided which of the 5 (one per group) will be read in the classroom and in the library (Arvaniti, 2008). The facilitator invites the student-readers to flip through the books, observe the language, the style, the cover and report their concerns and criteria. If necessary, s/he also ensures that s/he can help with suggestions (Bruner, 1960; Kragler, 2000). Any book not selected was returned to its place. The main goal was for the students to perceive the book as an aesthetic object and to understand the way a library operates and is organized. Furthermore, it was considered important that they experience the library not as a storehouse of books, but as a room for reading and social interaction (Tilke, 1998).

#### **Panel. The final selections of the 5 teams:**

A. Zei, Constantine and her spiders (2002)

M. Kontoleon, A story of Fyodor (2004)

E. Hemingway, The Old Man and the Sea, transl. in greek F. Kondylis (2013)

A. L. Sepulveda, An Old Man Who Read Love Stories, trans. in greek A. Kyriakidis (2012)

M. Kliafa, Hard times for little princes (2010)

A discussion followed about the story-line of the works, the selection criteria and after the expressive reading of a passage from each of the 5 works, the community finally decided on the story of A. L. Sepulveda, as they were impressed by the theme and the language of the story (Cooper, George & Sanders, 1994). Their choice and statements showed an advanced reading curiosity and willingness to travel through space and time through reading.

In general, the reading process follows the cognitive and literary theories we mentioned. The specific novel was considered an excellent choice to implement cooperative learning and to raise awareness on environmental and human rights issues. Furthermore, it links reading literature with the cultivation of historical continuity because of the issues raised in the story (Kalogirou, 2019; Kokkos, 1999). The facilitator organizes the interpretive approach into structural units that facilitate participation and application of the whole-parts-whole process when reading. The second phase involved 6 teaching hours and the third phase 2 teaching hours. The largest part of the reading approach was implemented in the School Library space, placing chairs around a table in the shape of a circle. There were also desks available, in case the groups wanted to gather and write during the creative exercises. Any representative of the group (or even the whole group with specific responsibilities) presenting their work was standing in the center of the circle. The facilitator also sat in a chair that was part of the same circle (Germanos, 2018). Listed below are sample activities based on the categories they belong to and the reading phase is indicated in parentheses.

A. Text-centered analysis. The participants comment interpretatively on individual passages in relation to the issues that each time their processing reveals (Bleich, 1978).

Sample activities:

## Activity 1 (Phase A)

What characteristics of the mayor's personality and personal journey can be found in the narrator's presentation? Suggest phrases and words that give such evidence.

## Activity 2 (Phase B)

What is the attitude of the protagonist regarding the relationship between man and nature? Draw your information from Bolivar's response to the mayor.

## Activity 4 (Phase C)

According to the last paragraph of the book, comment on what is the protagonist's view regarding the white people's view that the Shuar Indians are uncivilized while the whites are civilized?

B. Critical questions in relation to language choices that have an increased semantic function. Detecting patterns in content and form that take on a symbolic dimension (Smith, 1973; Tompkins, 1980).

Sample activities:

## Activity 1 (Phase A)

What feelings and state of mind regarding his stay in the area is revealed by the repetition of the mayor's motion of continuously mopping his forehead with the handkerchief?

## Activity 2 (Phase B)

What is the narrator's attitude towards the play's main characters and why does he choose to call the mayor "fat" and Bolivar "old"?

## Activity 3 (Phase C)

How does Bolivar perceive reading? What feelings does it create for him and what is the relation of books with the world of his everyday life?

C. Comparative examination and intertextual function.

Examining passages and patterns in parallel dialogue with other works to identify convergences and divergences (Kristeva, 1982; Clark & Holquist, 1984).

Sample activities:

## Activity 1 (Phase B)

Use Annie Proulx's novel *For Forest People* to notice commonalities between the Shuar and Mi'kmaq tribes in the two works. Justify your position with references to the texts.

## Activity 2 (Phase B and C)

An excerpt from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee is suggested and groups compare the two works regarding the issue of prejudice and social discrimination.

D. Simulations, role plays, character interviews. Diary notes from a character's point of view: e.g. of a secondary person watching the discussions. At this point archival material (photos, diaries, analyses) can also be used posted on line by the facilitator. (Kalogirou, 2019; Linden, & Renshaw, 2004).

## Activity 1 (Phase A)

Suppose you are a journalist and your newspaper sends you to cover the event (the death of a white man by an animal attack), which is also the beginning of the plot. What questions would you ask the mayor?

## Activity 2 (Phase B)

Collaborative writing in groups of three. Join the local council and speak as a representative of the Shuar tribe. What would you say in the meeting and what reactions would your attitude cause?

## Activity 3 (Phase C)

Study the material posted on the online class about the Amazon and environmental destruction. How do you think the book contributes to the discussion about the relationship of man and nature?

E. Semiotics of the image/ inter-artistic dialogue. Utilization of book covers, but also other works of art e.g. comics, films etc. that seem to be related to the literary text (Tompkins, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1994).

Sample activities:

## Activity 1 (Phase B)

Based on the way the white people treat the Shuar tribe, give voice to the Augustus statue Saint-Gauden, Hiawatha, 1874 (see below).



Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Hiawatha (1874)

Activity 2 (Phase C).

How does Western painting of the period depict white settlers during the period of conquest of the New World? Which elements of the composition of the picture below (Ralph Earl, Marinus Willett) echo the prejudice the Shuars face in the book?



Ralph Earl, Marinus Willett (about 1791)

F. Creative Writing. Reconstruction of scenes, transfer of characters or situations to another fictional environment and more complex processes of creative speech production (Kotopoulos, 2013).

Sample activities:

Activity 1 (Phase B).

Narrate the story, speaking in the voice of one of the natives who do not know the white man's language well.

Activity 2 (Phase B)

Adapt the scene of the conflict with the mayor or the animal, presenting a young version of Bolivar full of physical vigor, excitement, but also impulsiveness. What would change in the development of the plot? Write your own short version of a scene.

Activity 3 (Phase C)

You are tasked with writing a short poem to be published in the local newspaper of El Idilio trying to express your concern about the destruction of the flora and fauna of the forest.

Activity 4 (Phase C)

As a group, create your own fictional character who enters the story and influences its development. Give us his portrait: name, age, status, origin, appearance, personality traits.

G. Short Essay Production: Participants can present their personal reactions to the narrative, discussing how the book has impacted their relationship with nature and their views on issues of ecology or human rights (Cooper, George & Sanders, 1994).

Sample activity (optional) (Phase C)

After reading the material posted in the online class and the book, write a short text (about 400 words) about how literature can help reduce social discrimination. You can work individually or in groups.

#### 4. Findings

The specific approach shows how literature can help raise awareness among young readers about a range of contemporary social issues. Reading literary texts is a playful way for adolescents to travel to the past and different areas and mentally getting to know cultures and historical events. It is important in such a process to maintain the entertaining character of reading – reading for pleasure – and that the facilitator does not bombard students with lectures with an emphasis on information (Nesari, 2015).

The present project reveals that student-readers, who are familiar with the methodology to creatively utilize the space of the school library, respond satisfactorily in terms of participation and attitude towards reading. Adjustments, however, are necessary in any new application of an approach to another readership. It was also observed that the change of space and at the same time the clear instructions for the activities enhanced the positive attitudes of student-readers towards cooperation. From their general attitude and behavior in the School Library it appeared that the students wish for changes in their school routine. However, they realized and commented that their library lacks contemporary books and the necessary furniture and equipment. Another difficulty that occurred was returning the books to the right place, since there was no librarian, and the library operated under the responsibility of the educators (Arvaniti, 2008). However, their response to the material nature of the book was interesting: worn out and multi-page books with small print were not selected, highlighting the importance of book format in reader interest and selection (Kragler, 2000).

On the other hand, in some sessions the young readers were too exhausted to participate. It was observed that, although the increased number of activities implemented in Model Schools motivates students, they quickly lose interest in the final goal of the activity. Thus, the initially increased interest of the students in participation directs the facilitator of reading groups to organize hasty projects that sometimes do not lead to the expected results. There is the need, therefore, to develop a culture of cooperation between educators and librarians in educational communities and libraries, in order to design practices that maintain a consistent performance of students. Undoubtedly, in this direction, the role of the educator and librarian is to act as facilitators of reading (Kokkos, 1999; Frydaki, 2003).

#### 5. Conclusion

It is clear that the love of reading for children and adolescents is not a goal that concerns only the classroom, the School Library or Children's Libraries. Precisely because of their understaffing and often under-functioning, especially in Greek Secondary Education, it is important that other forms of libraries support the educational goals of reading literature in school. Their proper function reveals that the intention and disposition to read is not learned, but activated (Stauffer, 1970).

In relation to literature, the School Library, as well as any Library that undertakes implementing actions related to the cultivation of reading sensitivity aims at: a. strengthening reading habits in children from an early age, b. providing opportunities for creative expression and social interaction, c. developing aesthetic literacy and the promotion of interculturalism, d. facilitating access of young library users-readers to a variety of reading (and more general cultural stimuli) and e. cultivating information literacy alongside reading literacy (Arvanitis, 2008; Kopsida-Vrettou, 2011). The specially-designed and autonomous space of the library for a collaborative approach to reading is a condition for the effective functioning of a reading community (Tafa, 2001). However, fragmentation in Greek education makes it difficult for School Libraries to realize their mission. The often laudable efforts of teachers, although necessary, cannot substitute the way a modern library should operate with regard to its educational role (Klimentioti & Giannoulis, 2016).

Teaching approaches, such as the above, reveal the role that the School Library can have in supporting the teaching of literature and in forming positive experiences regarding the reading of the literary texts in the school community. Any instructional proposal that cultivates the recreational nature of reading can contribute to strengthening reading motivation in young readers.

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