

Empowering refugee children with the use of Persona Doll

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Abstract

This study focuses on Arabic-speaking children with a refugee or/and migrant background and its purpose is to explore if and how the Persona Doll method can influence this target group in terms of their attitudes and learning. The present study is a qualitative research in the form of action research. On the basis of data collection through participant observation, interviews and identity texts, a Persona Doll was designed that mirrored specific characteristics of the participant children and shared stories that reflected their personal experiences. The designed sessions with the Persona Doll were based on Brown's methodology and were implemented in a non-formal education setting. In this paper, a detailed description is provided and after content analysis, the major findings are presented. Specifically, it was demonstrated that the Persona Doll generated positive attitudes, contributed to language education and empowered bicultural identity.

Keywords: Persona Doll Method, Children of Migrant or Refugee Origin, Arabic-Speakers, Identity Affirmation, Language Education

DOI: 10.29329/ijpe.2021.332.13

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INTRODUCTION

Empowering refugee children with the use of Persona Doll

Greece has been facing new challenges due to the increasing numbers of migrants it has been receiving recently (Varga, 2015). An area of concern is the education of these populations. Arab children in particular needed intense focus. By consulting relevant literature (Block, Cross, Riggs & Gibbs, 2014; Dooley, 2017; Dryden-Peterson, 2015; Save the children, 2017), one can establish parameters that should be considered for their education. An important issue is their emotional and social well-being. In addition, they should be educated and (re)integrated into regular school life. Similarly, they should be empowered so as to face racism or discrimination. It is also of vital importance to acquire the dominant language, without, however, being uprooted from their heritage language or from their culture (Cummins, 2004).

An intriguing and child-friendly approach is the Persona Doll (henceforth PD), an educational tool useful for empowerment and intercultural education (Vitsou, 2016; Vitsou & Magos, in press). All types of dolls have ineffable power on children and can attract even adults (Vitsou, 2013). The PD can trigger children's imagination, help them express their emotions and thoughts, motivate their participation and bridge their differences in terms of culture, race, religion or language (Vitsou, 2016).

In the present study, the PD was used with Arabic-speaking refugee or/and migrant children in a non-formal education context. The aim of the research was to explore if it would influence and support them in terms of their emotional expression, empowerment and bilingualism or emergent bilingualism.

Embracing diversity through the Persona Doll Approach

The Persona Doll Approach (henceforth PDA) is an educational tool that functions as an instrument for approaching diversity and equality. It applies anti-discrimination interventions and relies on the belief that children are not inherently ill-natured; negative attitudes are learned and can be rectified (Smith, 2009). The dolls 'visit' the children and share their life stories. These stories introduce difficult issues relevant to human rights, or social issues related to racism, preconceptions, disability and ableism, poverty, gender, social class differences, physical differences, and diseases such as AIDS. The PD enhances children's connection to the stories and thus provokes interaction and opportunities for flexible and critical thinking. It also provides psychosocial support, develops their communication and problem-solving skills, disputes discrimination, and reinforces their emotional literacy. Moreover, through the stories of the dolls, children realize that both actions and words can be hurtful, and learn to support non-discriminatory practices (Brown, 2001; Smith, 2006, 2009).

A series of researches have been conducted in many countries concerning the impact of the PDA on changing the behaviour of young children, on combating prejudice and racism, on them expressing their feelings, and developing empathy (Acar & Çetin, 2017; Saneka & de Witt, 2019; Jesuvadian & Wright, 2011).

Carol Smith, a PD trainer, carried out researches to evaluate the results of the PD both on young children and their teachers. Her investigations were conducted in South Africa, in poor areas, with high discrimination rates. Through the PDA, the selected stories addressed issues like racism, xenophobia, abuse, inequality, prejudice, diversity, inclusion and human rights. Her researches aimed to raise issues of identity and self-esteem, develop empathy and emotional intelligence, cease negative behaviors toward diversity and promote an activist approach (Smith, 2009; 2013).

Accordingly, Glenda Mac Naughton (2000) undertook the Australian Preschool Equity and Social Diversity (PESD) research project and used PDs to uncover young children's attitudes toward

the aboriginal population of Australia. The results revealed that the children knew much more about social diversity than the researchers thought. The Anglo-Australian children had misconceptions of the culture of indigenous Australians. Furthermore, there were discriminatory reactions toward a PD because of its dark skin. At the end of the project, Mac Naughton concluded that “PDs, their stories and the conversations they initiate can and do illuminate the diverse and complex understandings young children are constructing about the social world around them” (Brown, 2001, p.55).

Furthermore, several teachers stated that when they used the Doll, “the classroom atmosphere was different”, that is, “more relaxed, involved and participatory” (Smith, 2009, p. 88). Reportedly, the children were more aware of their feelings and expressed them more frequently (Smith, 2013). They could relate emotionally more easily when a PD was present. And the Doll even made it easy for shy children to participate in discussions (Smith, 2009).

Teachers also pointed out that PDs’ stories, as well as their appearance in real clothes, helped children empathize with them (Smith, 2009, p. 86-87). They felt relieved, because they could share their problems with the Dolls and other pupils. This illustrates that PDs’ sessions can be a “therapeutic and psycho-social” practice for children’s support (ibid, p. 87).

As mentioned, PDs were used in South Africa, in the UK, in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. However, “PDs are not so widely known” in Greece (Dimitriadi, 2015, p.63). Still, one can identify limited research efforts to academic conference presentations (Dimitriadi, Kollara & Michali, 2013; Dimitriadi, 2018; Kantartzi, 2018; Vitsou & Agtsidou, 2008), graduate and postgraduate dissertations (Christou, 2016; Lioliou, 2011), and issues of recently published journals (Kantartzi, 2019; Vitsou, 2014).

The target groups of these researches ranged from kindergarten to elementary pupils. The studies investigated whether the PD could cause a shift in children’ stereotypical perceptions, exclusionary behaviors, and attitudes towards injustice. The results suggested that in all cases the PD was positively accepted and enhanced empathy among pupils (Christou, 2016; Vitsou & Agtsidou, 2008; Vitsou & Magos, in press). Furthermore, it was indicated that it helped children embrace their heritage identity, recognize unfair behaviors (Vitsou & Agtsidou, 2008), reduce exclusionary behaviors (Christou, 2016), and adopt positive attitudes toward refugees (Vitsou & Magos, in press).

Research Aim and Questions

The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of the PD on Arabic- speaking children with a refugee and/or migrant background, regarding their attitudes and their learning experiences. More specifically, the following research questions are formulated:

- Which attitudes, behaviours, and feelings are generated by the PD to this specific target group?
- Which educational benefits are developed by the PD to these children?

Research Design

In the present study, a qualitative research method was employed and its guidelines were followed (Creswell, 2014). Also, some characteristics of an action research approach were adopted. As Creswell (2012) states, with action research, the practice of education can be improved by examining and reflecting on existing or arising issues. In addition, through this research design, students and other individuals are liberated from “situations that constrain their self-development and self-determination” (p.577).

Research Site and Sample

The intervention was conducted in a non-profit organization, the “Forum Anaptyxis” (Φόρουμ Ανάπτυξης 1 مُنتدى التنمية، namely Development Forum) established approximately in 2016. This NGO was selected because it has many Arabic-speaking students and teachers with a refugee or/and migrant background. For these children, the Forum’s ideology is to reinforce and promote only the Arabic language, empowering in that way their identity. Thus, the children are engaged in learning Arabic and Quran.

The sample consisted of primary-school-aged children who attend Arabic lessons once a week, every Saturday, for four hours. The choice of the organization and classroom was intentional (Bryman, 2017), and the selected action framework was their learning place. The participants were nine, from five to ten years old, and had basic knowledge of Greek (Table1).

Table 1 Participants ‘characteristics

Participants	Age	Country of origin	Religion	Native language	Years of stay	Years of Study in Forum
S1 girl	7	Syria	Islam	Arabic	Since her birth	2 years
S2 girl	8	Syria	Islam	Arabic	2 years	1 year
S3 girl	8	Syria	Islam	Arabic	3 years	2 years
S4 boy	9	Morocco	Islam	Arabic	Since his birth	1 and a half year
S5 boy	9,5	Syria	Islam	Arabic	Since his birth	2 years
S6 boy	9,5	Syria	Islam	Arabic	Since his birth	2 years
S7 boy	10	Syria	Islam	Arabic	Since his birth	3 years
S8 boy	6	Syria	Islam	Arabic	Since his birth	1 year
S9 boy	7	Syria	Islam	Arabic	2 years	1 and a half year

Methodological Tools and Procedure

As Stemler states (2001), in qualitative research, validity and credibility are ensured through triangulation of data. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative and multiple sources of data lead to concrete results and to a better understanding of the object of research. Accordingly, a variety of qualitative research tools were employed for data collection. The researcher utilized field notes, observations, interviews with the children, identity texts² created by the children and of course young learners the Persona Doll Method (Bolderston, 2012; Brownell, 2019; Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2015; Cummins et. al, 2006). These tools were perceived as appropriate for gathering and analyzing data to make the PD and create its profile and its stories (Table 2).

¹The information was retrieved from:

["Φόρουμ Ανάπτυξης" - Facebook مُنتدى التنمية](#)

²According to Cummins et. al. (2006), identity texts are creative products designed by the students within the pedagogical space. The construct of identity texts can form powerful communication between the learners and the teachers and also illustrate the links between identity affirmation and literacy engagement (Cummins, Hu, Markus & Montero, 2015). This research tool gave voice to the children and revealed some information about their personal identity and their everyday life.

Table 2 Main Data

Source of data	Main collected data	Where these data were used
<i>Children's interviews</i>	During interviewing: Translanguaging instances to make meaning Accent differentiated than that of a native Greek child Home: Biographical information Sociolinguistic profile Low reading skills in Arabic	→ Deploying children's bilingual identity with translanguaging approach during the PD sessions → Conversations through the PD sessions to reinforce speaking skills. Creating the PD's profile and the 1 st storytelling session. → Home activity at the 4 th PD session to reinforce reading skills
	Greek school: Difficulties and attitudes concerning Greek. Low self-esteem in using the first language Desire to use Arabic at school Doing homework without parental engagement	→ Designing the 3 rd PD session to enhance Greek speaking and comprehension skills and reinforce self-confidence in terms of Greek language use Clues used at the 1 st storytelling of the PD. Bridging children's languages, with translanguaging practices. → Increasing parental involvement
<i>Observation</i>	Children's physical features Classroom climate: monotony Teaching description: Exclusive use of Arabic Teacher-centered method Low writing skills in Arabic A participant's refusal to attend	→ PD's physical appearance → Need for something enjoyable: use of PD → Use of translanguaging at the PD sessions → Learner-centered method - group discussion with the use of PD → Written home activity at the 4 th PD session to reinforce writing skills. → Use of the PD as a motivation
<i>Identity texts</i>	Tendency for a wide linguistic repertoire (Arabic, Greek, English)	→ Creating a birthday drawing-card for the PD at the 2 nd session. → Deploying children's bilingual identity with translanguaging approach during the PD sessions.

Furthermore, their use ensured a safe and supportive environment for the young participants, allowing them to unfold their experiences and thoughts.

Creating the Persona Doll's profile

With these tools, the researcher tried to consider all possible aspects of the children's lives, and focused on documenting their physical characteristics, the ethnic and cultural identities, their socio-economic status, the structure of their families, and their preferences (Vitsou & Agtsidou, 2008). Furthermore, information was gathered regarding their duration of stay in Greece, their knowledge of Greek, their socio-economic and family status. After the analysis of these data, the identity and stories of the PD were created, and its profile was completed based on the following table of Rodford (n.d.) (Table 3).

Table 3 The Persona Doll's profile

Name	Said/Saed/ Saeed سعيد (meaning: happy or lucky)
Age	7 years old
Date of birth	6-12-2012
Country of origin	Syria
Appearance	Black hair, brown eyes, beige-skinned
Favourite Foods / Sweet	Mousakhan, Makloubeh, Mansaf, / Ice-cream
Pets	He takes care of a kitten in the yard of the block of flats
Favourite game	Tag is his favourite playground game that involves two or more players' chasing other players
Favourite Activities	Football, bike riding and walks in the sea
Favourite colour	Blue
TV program	MBC3 channel which presents children's interest content
What type of house does he/she live in	A small but nice apartment close to his school
Family Background	He lives with his parents: His mother's name is Noor نور (meaning: light) (twenty-eight years old), and his father's name is Imran عمران (meaning: prosperity) (thirty-years old). His elder brother Naser ناصر (meaning: friend, protector) (ten years old) and his younger twin sisters Iman ایمان (meaning: faith or belief) and Amani أماني (meaning: wishes, aspirations, desires) (five years old)
Religion	Muslim
Language	Arabic, English and Greek
Any other significant details	He has been in Greece for 12 months with his family. He speaks mainly Arabic and still has difficulty in Greek. He is good at running fast. He doesn't like fighting

The PD was dressed in actual kids' clothes to help children identify with it and develop empathy during their contact (Smith, 2009). The researcher opted to introduce a child-like boy Doll (Figure 1, since the majority of the research participants were boys, and research suggests that the first Doll to be presented should be a male one (Brown, 2001; Dimitriadi, 2015; Vitsou & Agtzidou, 2008).



Figure 1 The Persona Doll Saeed

The Persona Doll Sessions

The PD sessions and their aims are presented below (Table 4).

Table 4 The PD sessions

1 st Session			
Aim	Objective	Description	Participants
Introducing the PD to the children.	Familiarizing the children of the classroom with the PD.	a) Sharing basic information about PD's life story. b) Questions that were asked by the class.	Nine participants were present.
2 nd Session			
Knowing better the PD and becoming friends with it.	a) Presenting a happy, pleasant event. b) Finding similarities with the PD. c) Establishing a friendly climate.	Celebrating the PD's birthday; songs and drawings-cards.	Eight participants were present.
3 rd Session			
1. Developing and strengthening critical thinking skills. 2. Identifying with the PD.	a) Increasing empathy for the PD. b) Encouraging the children to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences. c) Unlearning negative attitudes.	a) Presenting an unfair incidence of violence. b) Presenting a problematic situation concerning the second language. c) Helping the PD. to understand a fable of Aesop: a "mini-lesson".	Nine participants were present.
4 th Session			
Strengthening and boosting the self-confidence of children.	Students' positive reinforcement through their resolution to the Doll's problem.	a) Children read the stories they wrote. b) The PD. thanks the children for their contributions.	Seven participants were present.

Throughout the first PD session, a conversation between the researcher and the participants was initiated. They were encouraged to actively participate by asking more questions about the PD's image and story and make this new 'person' feel comfortable and welcome. They were sitting around a table, while the PD was sitting on the researcher's lap speaking to her ear (Figure 2). The researcher conveyed the PD's words to the young students using translanguaging of Greek and Arabic.



Figure 2 Presenting the Persona Doll

During the following sessions, the PD shared problematic situations that emerged from the children's interviews. These situations introduced issues of inequality (Ridley, 2006; Smith, 2009) and

the participants found out what bothered the PD. They were given the opportunity to share their feelings and thoughts on its problems, and express their own relevant ones (Smith, 2009; Ridley, 2006). The aim was to develop children's empathy (Allen & Whalley, 2010)

Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed through the content analysis method which “has been defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding” (Stempler, 2001, p.6). Photos and field notes were taken and studied several times. The goal was to identify and code the most important information and then categorize it into themes, based on literature and the aims of the study (Schreier, 2014). Afterwards, the data were decrypted and meaningful interpretations were extracted. (Roller, 2019; Williamson, Given & Scifleet, 2018).

RESULTS

The PD sessions provided several findings answering the initial research questions. Accordingly, these data were categorized and are presented cohesively in themes. The findings are highlighted by direct quotations taken from the researcher's field notes.

Children's responses to the PD: The children showed strong identification and empathy with the PD. Specifically, when it was first introduced in the classroom, they identified with certain of its characteristics, and this motivated them to open up. As Brown (2001, p.17) maintains, “children need to be able to relate to particular features that they share with the Dolls.” According to the researcher's field notes, the children were happy, excited, and cheered when they found similarities with the PD, as it can be illustrated in the following research-participants interaction:

R: “*Saeed is seven years old*”

S1 & S9: “*me too*”

R: “*Saeed is from Syria*”

a chorus of “just like me”, “just like us”

S6: “*from which city of Syria?*”

R: “*from Aleppo*”

S3: “*I am from Aleppo, too*”

Most participants were boys; so, according to literature (Brown, 2001; Dimitriadi, 2015; Vitsou & Agtzidou, 2008), a boy-like PD was introduced. At the first meeting, the boys were restrained from physical contact. However, over the next sessions, they wanted to play with it, greeted it, hugged it and helped it to wear its fallen shoe (Figure 3).

Interestingly, even boys older than six years old responded positively to it and effectively pretended that it was a child just like them. This is important, as the literature suggests that the PD has an impact mainly on children younger than six years old (Brown, 2001; Dimirtiadi 2015, Pagett, 2005). The children were talkative, participative, and asked the PD a lot of questions:

S6: “*In which school in Zografou does he go?*”

S5: “*What does he prefer, winter or summer?*”

S9: “*Pizza or souvlaki?*”

S4: “*Car or motorcycle?*”

All the above suggest that the boys were stimulated by a boy-like doll, challenging stereotypes about dolls attracting girls exclusively.



Figure 3 Playing and helping the PD

The children's responses to the PD were positive and a good classroom climate was created. The activities during the sessions created a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere. The girls immediately accepted the PD and showed affection. For example, a participant expressed with embarrassment her will to kiss it.

S1: *"I want to kiss Saeed"*

The young participants manifested caring, compassion and empathy (Figure 4). They wanted to communicate with the PD and know it better:

S1: *"I have my young sister here"*.

S9: *"my mother teaches here and we bring Layana [his two-years-old sister] with us"*

S1: *"Tell him to bring his brother and sisters the next time"*

For this reason, they listened attentively and respectfully his stories, which is an essential goal of PDA (Brown, 2001).

Noteworthy, the PD captured also the interest of the other students of the Forum. They stared at it and approached the researcher during their break to ask questions such as:

"What is his name?"

"What is he doing here?"

Its appearance was very much like theirs, which was an element of attraction.



Figure 4 Hugging the PD and showing affection

Children's positive attitudes generated thanks to/ toward the PD: The unpredicted violent incident against the PD triggered particular attitudes. The researcher had in mind the details of the incident and also considered instances of fighting among the children that were reported by the coordinator of the Forum. Therefore, she took the initiative to raise –through the PD– children's awareness of violent behaviors in addition to her pre-planned unpleasant story.

The PD's first, generalized question, i.e. whether they had ever felt sad, allowed for children's free and uncensored expression of sadness due to numerous reasons. A boy expressed his grievance against a friend who stopped playing with him.

S5: *"I became sad when a good friend of mine stopped calling me for going to play and when we met again, he didn't remember my sister's name."*

Others expressed a sadness much more related to their collective, severe sufferings:

S3: *"I sometimes get sad because I miss my family in Syria"*

S6: *"There is no peace in Syria; people die and I don't like that, I have relatives there"*

All the children showed their understanding of the PD's feelings with words and also with nods. Their sorrows and their empathizing with the PD were expressed unreservedly.

A discussion was raised about what to do when we observe such unjust, bad actions, and all the children agreed that they should be stopped. Once again, they expressed themselves not only through words; they all applauded generously the girls who defended the PD.

In this first incident, the PD was a victim of an aggressive act. The most important finding is the activist reaction of the two participant girls:

S2: *"I told them not to tease him [the Persona Doll Saeed]."*

S1: *"I looked at them like that"* and she drew her brow in anger.

As Derman-Sparks et al. (1989) support, PD assists in unlearning negative attitudes and promotes an activist approach. The children's affection to the PD, and their considering it as an actual

person, gradually transformed into the desire to help it. The girls recognized and understood unfairness, and demonstrated empowerment by standing up for the PD. In the face of the unfair behavior, they did not remain passive observers, but intervened actively to defend it.

Similarly, positive attitudes were observed during the PD sessions. When it mentioned its insufficient knowledge of Greek, an empathetic and caring interaction took place, as some young participants tried to comfort it, sharing their personal stories:

S3: *“don’t be sad; you will learn”*

S1: *“me too! I don’t speak Greek very well, but I try”*

Another child wanted to dispel his fear by saying:

S6: *“when I was at preschool, they bullied me, and I did the same to them and after that we became friends.”*

Others adopted problem-solving skills by saying:

S9: *“I speak Greek well; I can teach him [the Persona Doll Saeed]”*

S5: *“My teacher tells me to speak Greek with my classmates and I will get improved.”*

A young girl strongly identified with the Persona Doll:

S2: *“I speak little Greek.... I don’t always understand them.... I prefer this school [the Forum] because I can understand everything.”*

The particular girl (Figure 5) treated the PD as a real child and tried to help it with its school activity: she took it from the researcher’s knees, put it on a chair and read the fable aloud.

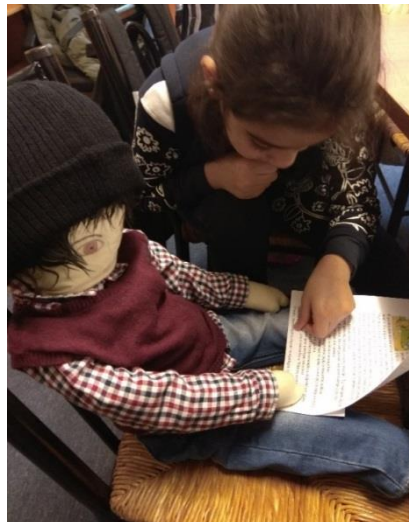


Figure 5 Helping the Persona Doll learn

The Persona Doll motivated language learning: the findings of the research suggest that the PD is a tool that motivates learning. In the third session, where the researcher distributed the fable of the Tortoise and the Hare, the participants volunteered to read the story to help the PD understand it:

S5: *“Can I read?”*

S8: "I want to read"

Even children with difficulties in Greek felt motivated to read at their own pace. The other participants did not disapprove of their attempt, but were patient and listened respectfully.

Moreover, the children wanted to read in Greek and translate into Arabic. An indicative example is the case of the participant S8, who strongly objected to participating in the Arabic lessons. During the PD sessions, there was a change in his attitude. He was gladly involved in the whole procedure and participated actively. He was raising his hand with readiness and strongly expressed his desire to read more than once, causing the obvious surprise of his teacher.

The PD reinforced language skills: The PD led to language development, as the children eagerly participated in group discussions. They could remember details about the PD's life and previous sessions. They gradually built a wider vocabulary. This happened because they wanted to learn the meanings of many words in Greek and Arabic, and spent enough time practicing; therefore, it is quite possible that the new words became part of their vocabulary.

Thanks to the PD, the children had sufficient language practice. Specifically, they read in Greek an Aesop's fable, the Tortoise and the Hare, and then provided a translation in Arabic. Interestingly, when they were asked to provide a summary of the fable, some children employed translanguaging. To promote reading comprehension, a discussion took place about the moral of the story. Then, the children shared spontaneously their perceptions. In sum, they practiced abundantly their skills of reading, writing and speaking.

The PD contributed also in the parental involvement. Parents gladly assisted their children's learning. The participants talked with their parents about the fable and some of them cooperated to write it in Arabic (Figure 6). In the fourth session, these children showed with enthusiasm their writings. They reported that they worked pleasantly with their parents and that their parents were happy to work with them.

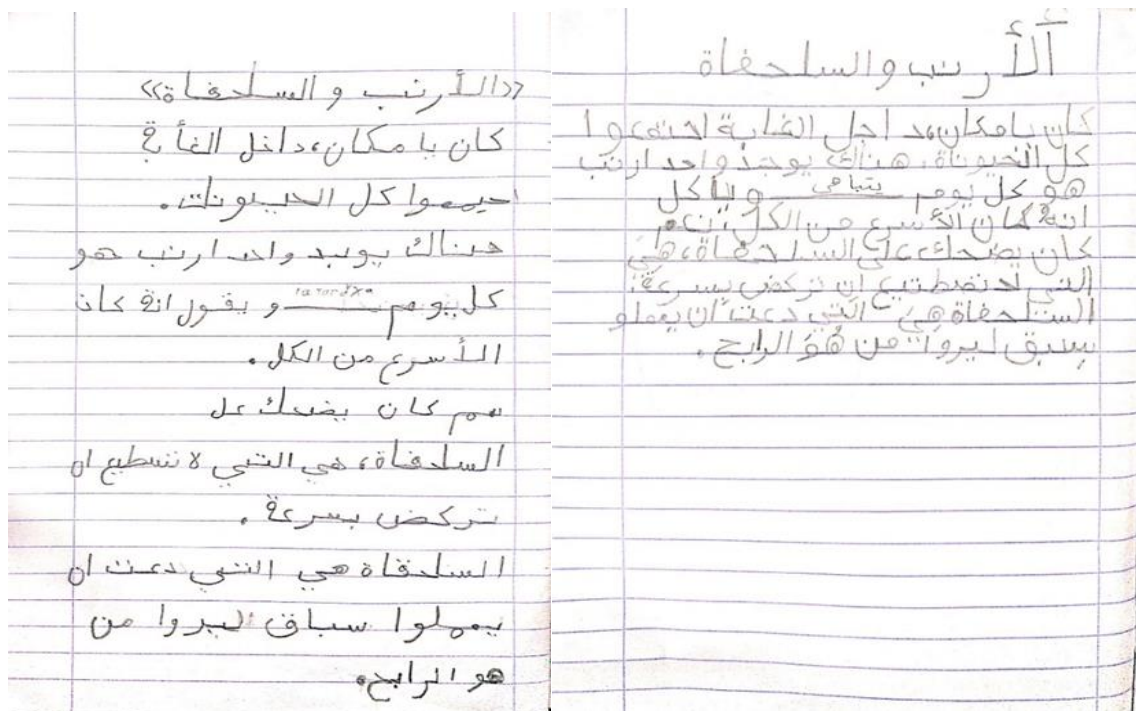


Figure 6 The fable in Arabic

The mini-lesson boosted the children's self-confidence mainly in the second language. Those with little knowledge of Greek read in Greek, while those with even less knowledge of Greek did not hesitate to join the discussion. Almost no one remained silent. They showed no embarrassment in case of errors; instead, they frequently asked for corrections, as they expressed interest about their mistakes in writing, their overall image indicates that they became more self-confident regarding their language learning.

The PD nurtured cultural identity. The PD sessions succeeded in bridging the participants' native language with the dominant one. In this way, they managed to fully express their cultural identity in terms of the language(s) they used, which was not evident.

In the Forum, the use of Arabic was almost obligatory. This had caused instances of awkward silence among the children during class observation and data collection. The researcher aimed to make space for their bilingualism, which became apparent in children's interviews, identity texts and drawings for the PD. Thus, in each PD session, the researcher, using translanguaging, encouraged the children to communicate leveraging all their linguistic and semiotic resources in order to express their bilingual identities. As a result, all of them followed her example and combined Greek and Arabic.

The children seemed to enjoy the combination of languages. This was evidenced firstly with the children's involvement with the fable, as they had to read in one language and summarize in another. These readings, as well as the writing of the fable in Arabic, were done agreeably. Similarly, the children seemed to enjoy singing in many languages the 'happy birthday' song. Regarding their spontaneous speaking, it became obvious that choosing words of both languages helped them express themselves more easily. For instance, concerning the moral of the fable, a discussion with translanguaging occurred, a part of which is set out:

S3: كان الأرنب يركض بسرعه وكان يضحك (على) χελώνα αργά αργά شوي شوي: S3

[the hare was fast and made fun of the turtle because it was walking slow slow]

R: “και είναι σωστό αυτό;” [and is this right?]

S2 & S3: “لا” [no]

S9: “مش مزبوط” [no, it is not right]

DISCUSSION

In general, the findings of this research confirmed the examined literature. This was apparent primarily in the children's positive response to the PD, as they saw in it somebody who was exactly like them (Brown, 2001). This resulted in their numerous manifestations of affection (Smith, 2009). Their identification with the PD, and their affection towards it contributed in the creation of a warm environment, which made them feel free to discuss sensitive issues (ibid).

As suggested by the literature, a boy-like doll was used (Brown, 2001; Dimitriadi, 2015; Vitsou & Agtsidou, 2008). It was showed that the boys overcame their hesitations and closely engaged with the PD. Remarkably, while there is evidence in the literature that the PD is effective for children up to six years old (Brown, 2001; Dimitriadi, 2015; Pagett, 2005), it was demonstrated that it was also efficient for older children. It is possible that these were carried away thanks to the charm of the PD and the power of togetherness.

The literature also suggested that the PD is stress-reducing (Vitsou, 2016). Expectedly, there was documented an absence of stress and an abundance of positive feelings, resulting in a positive classroom climate which promoted participation and children's unreserved expression.

As suggested by the literature, the PD made the children demonstrate affection, compassion, empathy (Smith, 2013; Vitsou, 2014), and respect for one's weaknesses (Vitsou, 2014). Thanks to the unexpected violent incident, they expressed their disapproval of any form of violence (Vitsou, & Agtsidou, 2008).

Being more active, the participants went beyond compassion and empathy. They actually offered consolation to the PD; they were invested in trying to find solutions to its problems; treating it like a real child, they wanted to protect it and called for help when it was in danger. These indicate that children exercised their problem-solving skills and made their first attempts towards activism. Such behaviors are consistent with the literature (Derman-Sparks et al., 1989) and mark the children's increasing empowerment.

Regarding the educational benefits of the PD, the results were in line with the literature and even advanced some inferences about the use of the PD, whose importance in increasing the language and communicative skills of preschoolers has been investigated and adequately discussed (Vitsou, 2013, 2016).

In this research, its contribution in literacy is investigated in a specific target group, namely young children of Arabic descent, with a migrant and/or refugee background. According to the results, the children increased their vocabulary both in Greek and Arabic, and this happened thanks to their genuine interest in learning new words. This interest was manifested through their numerous questions and practice attempts.

Besides their vocabulary increase, they also practised their reading and reading comprehension skills, and, to some extent, their storytelling and summarizing skills. Once again, if this was triggered by the PD, it happened because the children wanted it. The fact that a child, once unwilling to participate in class activities, became eager to engage with the PD, indicates what powerful influence this latter was. It was showed that it actually motivated children's language learning and assisted in the enhancement of their language skills.

This research showed that two factors affected considerably the children's language education; first, the absence of any stress, which is also highlighted by the literature (Vitsou, 2016). Secondly, choosing words of both their languages – Greek and Arabic – helped the children express themselves more easily. With the PD, language difficulties were tackled.

Using both languages and being free to adopt translanguaging produced more benefits than purely educational ones. The children deployed– and expanded– their linguistic repertoires in Greek and Arabic freely. This did not just facilitate their expression. In essence, they realized and embraced their dual cultural identity (Smith, 2009; Vitsou & Agtsidou, 2008). This is particularly important as, during their Arabic lessons, the children were urged to “silence” their Greek side. This practice can be defined as a monoglossic bilingual education (Garcia, 2009). Though the PD and translanguaging (ibid), they were given the choice to decide how much, and which parts of their identities they would demonstrate. They bridged their two languages, and developed an awareness of being part of two cultures.

Last but not least, another important pedagogical outcome of the PD was another kind of bridge, namely a bridge of communication with the children's parents, who gladly assisted their children in their tasks. This was a positive development, as, according to researchers (Androulakis, Gkaintartzi, Kitsiou, & Tsioli, 2016; Kaneva, 2012), learners' behavior, academic performance, self-esteem and willingness to learn can be boosted when family members get involved and contribute to their education.

Limitations of the study

Although the research was conducted without major hindrances, there were certain limitations such as the time restrictions which did not allow the researcher to investigate the subject matter in more depth. Furthermore, the sample used was quite small; thus, the results of the study cannot be generalized. Additionally, a longer observation period over the target group would have been preferable, in order for the researcher to collect more detailed data.

Another limitation concerns the interviewing process. Specifically, the interviews had a long duration, and were conducted in a non-secluded room, with the presence of an interpreter, an adult who was unknown to the children. All these might have caused a certain reluctance to the children, thereby impacting on their answers. Finally, the fact that the researcher was not officially trained in the use of the PD may also have affected the research.

Possible directions for further research

The present research dealt with a specific target group in specific circumstances. Certain relevant topics are suitable for future investigation. Specifically, the following suggestions are made.

This study did not investigate whether the impact of the PD had some kind of duration after its implementation either in terms of children's linguistic choices or regarding the consolidation of the attitudes they developed thanks to the PD. Therefore, its eventual long-term impact should be further investigated.

Additionally, it is useful to extend the research to older students. With further research, it is expected to collect data useful to locate problematic situations that these children face in their daily school life. Therefore, the PD could be designed appropriately and act for the resolution of unpleasant situations.

A vast area of interest is Greek Formal Education, which lends itself to a research in two directions. Firstly, in Intercultural Schools, Reception Classes, and Reception Centres for Refugee Education, where it can be explored to what extent the PD can be therapeutic and support migrant and refugee children psychosocially. Secondly, in typical elementary schools, where Greek students coexist with migrant and refugee ones. There, it would be interesting to find out whether the PD contributes to children's even integration, the creation of a non-discriminatory environment, and the acceptance of diversity.

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