

# Children Converse about Refugee Phenomenon Through Art

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## Abstract

Children can talk about the refugee phenomenon through Art. The research methodology that followed is an intervention program in a fifth class of elementary school in Thessaloniki, Greece during the second semester of 2019. The children views were audited through conversation during the program, in which the children participated in a free discussion on the basis of filmography, poetry and artworks referring to the refugee phenomenon. The results of the survey present the children views on the refugee issue and their impressions from their contact with the Art. It was a useful way for children to express their emotions and opinions about the refugees. They feel empathy about the anxiety that may feel the refugee kids.

**Keywords:** Children opinions, Refugee phenomenon, Art, Primary education

## 1. Introduction

Refugee phenomenon is an issue that concerns education as well. In Greece the mass arrival of a large number of refugees also creates an interest multicultural framework in education. The different cultural background of the refugee children could be a point of convergence rather than a divergence. These features overturn the data in the field of education and challenge of new teaching methods and learning objects. The way, which is approached, is sensitive because it affects children's lives and the treatment towards refugees. There are effective ways in order to converse about refugee issue in the class.

First of all, the use of the arts is capable to shape individual and community identities, to enhance relationships between people, to promote positive conflict transformation, development and, in general, contribute to peacebuilding (Cabedo-Mas, Nethsinghe & Forrest, 2017).

In this way it is possible for children involved in a speech production, either through poetry, film and artwork, in order to express their views about the refugee issue.

Below will be analyzed the refugee phenomenon in education and how it is dealt with, and how the refugee issue is presented in Art. From this survey, we expect to have a first picture of the children's views on refugee phenomenon.

## 2. Relevant Surveys

Previous researches approve that Art has a positive effect in education. In research of Tan and Gibson (2017) revealed that Early childhood research is focusing increasingly on issues of acknowledging and respecting the 'voices' of young children. Much of the focus in arts education research, however, has explored adult attitudes, resulting in what seems the invisibility of young children's opinions. Conducted in the context of early childhood education in Australia, the study, following a phenomenological approach, sought to understand the place of visual arts in the lives of four young children aged five to six years in a combined Kindergarten/Year One classroom located in Sydney. A range of child sensitive research tools were adapted from the 'Mosaic approach' to explore how children understand and conceive their early experiences of visual arts learning. In acknowledging the views of children, possibilities for improving arts pedagogy were considered as new questions emerged. The study confirmed the need to acknowledge and validate children's rich and perceptive attitudes through meaningful experiences and valued conversations.

In Holeva's research (2017), she developed a program "And if were you?". It is a human rights awareness and refugee program with experiential activities, theatre and educational drama. At the same time, it was particularly interesting to present the elements that empower the educators to take a more animating role in their professional activity and the obstacles they face in their efforts. All this was an appropriate field of a thorough and more systematic processing and investigation in order to draw conclusions about the usefulness of the theatre on the pupils education as well as about the role it can play in the professional development of teachers as intercultural ready-made animators of their group.

In Haralambaki's survey (2017) "Dramatic art with the aim of creative writing: a survey of elementary school pupils", she researched the benefits for the students by their participation in Creative Writing workshops using the dramatic art in education. This was an experimental research action that focused on writing ability, pupil attitudes towards Modern Greek language, pupils' perceptions and experiences about Creative Writing and Literature.

Also, Kafol, Denac and Znidarsic (2015) presented the results of a study conducted on a

sample of 245 preschool teachers from all over Slovenia. The study examined the arts and culture status of preschool teachers' views about preschool education in terms of the inclusion of arts and culture topics and their opinion about the implementation of the aims of arts and cultural education in the planned and operational curricula. Results show that preschool teachers do not consider spiritual, cultural and aesthetic values very important. Preschool teachers think that in kindergarten more attention should be given to the performing arts, music arts and cultural heritage. They often achieve most of the arts and cultural education aims in their work. However, they pay less attention to aims such as investigating and expressing the cultures of other nations, developing cultural identity awareness, expressing one's own culture and expressing one's own culture.

### **3. Art in Education**

It is important to engage children in creative thinking and making that can be applied to a variety of educational settings. Through exploring big ideas such as identity, expression, storytelling, impact, and reaction, students learn to engage in a variety of creative art forms and work with others to create work that is meaningful for them (Gulish & Elfstrom, 2017).

There is a fundamental need to produce visual representations, to extort moods, thoughts and emotions through lines, colors, forms and compositions. This is revealed from the artworks and images that one encounters in galleries, museums and everyday life. Thus, there is a need to link art education to issues that relate to daily life and experiences of children, with an educational frame that promotes creativity and critical thinking in authentic contexts and situations. The visual art is integrated into daily life and is an integral part of local and global culture. All these are means by which we represent experiences, ideas, emotions, and at the same time are intellectual functions, since they require perception, memory and the formation of concepts, thus promoting the development of children all over the world. Visual language allows the communication of ideas, meanings, information and emotions in special ways that cannot mimic any other symbol system (Sakellaris, 2013).

The dynamics of the visual art is great and can affect consciences that no other language is properly equipped to do. It is important to understand that the experiences of the visual arts are irreplaceable. As Freedman and Stuhr (2004) said "when students are allowed to investigate the range of visual culture with the guidance of a teacher, they can actively discover complex meanings, multiple connections, and enriched possibilities for creation and critique". In this way, the catalytic role of the Art is also marked as an alternative way of approaching the poetry, as well as a creative experience that leads the students try and experiment with alternative means, transforming the classroom into a creative workshop of personal and group expression of emotions and artistic creation.

The technique of reading images to produce speech facilitates the process of synthesizing concepts and understanding the concepts in depth. The images are a mean of understanding the environment in an artificial way with the ultimate goal to inquiry-based learning and experience (Grosdos, 2013).

In this case, the students read the images by presentation of artwork related to the refugee phenomenon, and also read the message from poems and films. In this way the students will express their opinion through the conversation.

### **4. State Hypotheses and Their Correspondence to Research Design**

According to the existing bibliography, students are expected to take advantage of their participation in conversation and activities, mainly at the cognitive, linguistic, emotional, ex-

pressive and social level.

The subject will be studied with a variety of tools and methods. Through the qualitative analysis of the data and the coexistence of the results will be researched the positive influence of art on the discourse of the students and their cooperative skills.

On the basis of the above, there is a need to study the children views of the refugee issue through films, poems and artwork, as a creative method and experiential for children.

## **5. Method**

The research methodology requires the researcher to choose, interact, evaluate and define the methods and techniques that will be followed in his research (Mohajan, 2018; Wellington, 2000). In the present study we chose the use of the quality method because we are interested in the children opinions through the speech production, inspiration and recording of their own text.

The qualitative method aims to revealing relationships or correlations between social subjects and social groups, describing, analyzing, interpreting and understanding social phenomena, situations and groups by answering questions "how" and "why". The suitability of the method lies in the fact that the present study studies the views of the children in an attempt to understand their views on the refugee issue in depth.

As this research focuses on exploring personal ideas, views and perceptions, so we chose qualitative techniques to explore children's current views, experiences and perceptions (Noonan, Boddy, Fairclough & Knowles, 2016). In this way it is possible to capture how their respondents, with their own terms, their own values and the complexities of their experiences and perceptions, see through their own eyes (Robson, 2007).

More specifically, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1) What are the children views about refugees?
- 2) Does the intervention program play a catalytic role in raising awareness of the refugee phenomenon?

### *5.1 Research Purpose*

In recent years, Greece has become a host country for refugees (Eurostat 2019), which gives a multicultural character not only at the social level but also at the school level. The phenomenon is becoming more and more relevant so many efforts are being made to integrate refugees into the school community. The purpose of the research was to explore children's views on the refugee issue through film, poetry and artwork based on the theory of the Aesthetic Response (Brinck, 2018; Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1994).

### *5.2 Sampling Procedures*

Initially, a small pilot survey was conducted in a trial phase, including a very small sample of 5 individuals - in order to make a clear assessment of the research tool and to correct any errors or omissions. Initially, parents' consent to the intervention was ensured. Throughout the intervention, the questions and answers were recorded, while care was taken to keep the necessary notes in all the meetings. The meetings and the conduct of the action as a whole did not present any particular problems or difficulties.

### 5.3 Sample Size, Power, and Precision

The sample consisted of 25 children in a fifth class of elementary school based in the town of Thessaloniki, Greece. It is a case study in the town of Thessaloniki, as a host town for refugees. The selection of school is done after a draw from the list of the cooperative schools. The cooperative list is an official list from the Ministry of Education. The intervention program held on the second semester 2019.

### 5.4 Research Design

The intervention program include meetings in which the children participated in a free discussion on the basis of research material of films, poems and artworks referred to the refugee issue:

The selected films are:

- 1) "Unfair Tales: Malak and the boat", UNICEF  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MT49ghJ7aGA>

In UNICEF's powerful new animated video, "Malak and the Boat," 7-year-old Malak and her family flee war-torn Syria and brave a dangerous journey across the Mediterranean.

- 2) "Irene" - A refugee's story, UNCHR <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQJhuAfVTqo>  
Irene is forced to flee her home and leave everything behind. All alone, she sets out to find help in other lands. She encounters the Stone-eaters, Smoky-crows, and Silk-tails. But none of them will help her because she is "strange and different from them."

The selected poems are:

- 1). "Refugees" by Dinos Siotis

*Many of those who stopped  
did not know where the road was coming from,  
others were looking for the port,  
others were asking about the station,  
a steeper was tuning his watch stopped for days,  
what did he care about the time?  
It was morning, the sun was rising  
and everything smelled like another scrap day.*

(From the poem collection "I don't know, I don't answer", published by Kedros, 2004)

- 2). "Refugees" by George Chouliaras

*On the other side  
of the photo I write to remember  
not where and when but who  
I am not in the photo*

*Nothing left us*

*To take with us*

*Only this photo*

*If you turn it over the other you will see me*

*You are in the photo, they ask me*

*I don't know what to tell you*

(From the poem collection "Fast Food Classics", published by Ypsilon, 1992)

The selected artworks are:

- 1). "Refugees" Cyprián Majerník, 1940.
- 2). "Refugee boat" Barbara Styliidou, 2015.
- 3). "Refugee Camp" Marius Ghita, 2015.
- 4). "The Boat 2" Abdalla Al Omari, 2017.

## **6. Results**

The analysis of the student's answers from discussions reveals how their responses were indeed aesthetic responses, and how instruction about visual elements of art and design can contribute to students' aesthetic responses (Pantaleo, 2013).

After the presenting of films, poems and artworks, took place many conversation among the students. There were questions about the films, about the poems and about the artworks. Subsequently, the data that gathered from the conversations were transcribed and took the form of text. The data analysis was done by using the content analysis method. Content analysis is a method suitable for the analysis of verbal, oral and written data (Mayring 2000).

### *6.1 Films*

Questions about the films:

-How they feel the refugees?

-What would you like to do for them?

To the question "How they feel the refugees?" children answer that most of the refugee children are frightened. Many refugee children have nobody to help them and most of them are unaccompanied minors.

*-They are distressed, frightened, sad, distressed (X2)*

*-It's not good not to have a person to help you (X5)*

*-They would go to another country for a better life (X7)*

To the question "What would you like to do for them?" Children answered that they feel strange and they would like to help them.

*-I would hug her (X1)*

*-I would take her to my house (X6)*

*-I would give my help when they needed it (X8)*

## 6.2 Poems

Questions about poems:

-What do you know about refugees?

-Where are they from?

-Why are they coming?

In the first question, "What do you know about refugees? Children answered that the refugees are people who are in danger. Children gave answers that prove they knew that they were coming from war-torn countries and the place where they lived is not safe.

To the next question "Where are they from?" Most children replied they did not know. In particular, 6 of 25 responded that they know that they came from Syria and Turkey.

To the question "Why are they coming?" children answered that they came from countries that have a war and cannot live there so they are coming here.

*- They come here because there is a war in their country! (X17)*

*- They cannot go to the school there and they have no homes! (X19)*

## 6.3 Artworks

Questions about the artworks:

-What is your impression?

-What is the subject?

-What do you feel when you see the paintings?

In the first question "What is your impression?" students answered that they impressed with the colors of the artworks. Those artists used color and shading in a manner that suited in the refugee issue.

In the second question "What is the subject?" children replied that the main subject was the refugee issue.

In the last question "What do you feel when you see the paintings?" they expressed their emotions that they feel strange and fear. All of them they said that they would not be in this situation.

All research material of films, poems and artworks were a stimulus for the speech production from the students. Moreover, it was a unique chance to express their thoughts in an effective way. All students replied in all questions and they revealed what they feel. Many of them they feel empathy and understanding of what refugee children may feel from this terrible experience.

## 7. Conclusion

From the results, conclusions can be drawn for the catalytic action of Art for the sensitization of children on the refugee issue. Also, at the same time there is a further action in cultivation the linguistic and social skills. It is evidence that the multi-level approach and the multimo-



dality of the films, images and texts can get the children more creative. Furthermore, they have involved in issues that may teachers believe that they will not. It seems that the intervention program sensitized them in a creative way. From the discussion in the class it seems to understand that they can help children in their own way such as getting together or giving their toys and clothes.

In relation to the questions of the research, the children's views about refugees are positive. The intervention program plays a catalytic role in raising awareness of the refugees. Also, it turns out that children have an opinion and expressed it, and the intervention program played a catalytic role in sensitization.

From the results of the research it appears that the children through the Art in combination with the films, poems and artworks were able to express their views and express their thoughts about the refugees and the refugee issue in an effective way. Based on the results of the small sample, we recognize the great importance of Art for externalizing students' emotions. Also, there is an effortless expression of their speech. The intervention program focused on films and poetry and enriched with artworks shows its effectiveness.

Art as alterity takes students beyond where they are and what they have, and teaches them to appreciate and respect difference and diversity. If art as alterity is so essential to human subjectivity and society, and if education is conceived as a process of human growth and formation, then Art as alterity is essential to education and needs to be more seriously engaged and more fully integrated into the whole educational process instead of being isolated in arts education (Zhao, 2014).

Our findings are in accordance with the outcomes of Miller and Bogatova (2019) that reveal the Art Integration produced a number of positive outcomes for the participating students, as well as teachers, who participated in the program. This evaluation documented a number of positive outcomes related to quality of teaching, student engagement and learning habits (Miller & Bogatova, 2019). This is a safe method for teachers in order to analyze issues that are considered forbidden. This is a way that young children are already adopting postmodern visual culture as a framework for understanding reality outside of school (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004).

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