Does length matter? Using feature and short films in the training of educators in film and intercultural education

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Abstract

This article highlights the qualities and potential of short films, which make it an appropriate and innovative pedagogical tool. The relevant literature review shows that regarding film education and the use of short films for educational purposes, both international research and research in Greece, is limited. Within the framework of an original experiential training programme for educators for the development of intercultural competence through films and cinematherapy, entitled "CINEducation", short films were used alongside feature-length films, offering variety and diversity in content. The programme is theoretically framed by critical pedagogy, the principles of intercultural and inclusive education, as well as adult education, in particular transformative learning and person-centred education. The programme is also linked to the principles of experiential learning, education through art and action research, placing the focus on individual and subjective experience, otherness and the transformative potential of education, films and cinematherapy. It aims to contribute to the fields of intercultural and film education, responding to the growing demand for training educators with new tools and in new tools. This article explores short films as a particularly intriguing and valuable option for supporting educational purposes and goals.

Keywords: Cinema, short and feature-length film, educator training, film education, intercultural education

Introduction

For most people, the concept of a film is directly associated with feature-length movies. Most individuals, when hearing the word "movie", they usually imagine a feature-length production. However, feature-length films are not the only format available to filmmakers and, subsequently, to educators who incorporate cinema into their teaching practices. This article focuses on short films, presenting them as a particularly valuable and effective option for supporting educational goals.

According to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, a short film is defined as "an original motion picture" with limited distribution. It can function either as a way to introduce a filmmaker or as an independent work of art.

In recent years, there has been significant interest in cinematic education in Greece, especially from certain private organizations, as well as the occasional and fragmented use of films in the educational process. A key innovation of the research and training intervention implemented is the systematic and targeted use of films and

techniques of cinematic education, with the primary method of film reception and processing being cinematherapy, aimed at developing the intercultural competence of educators at all levels. Methodologically, the research follows a mixed research model. Specifically, for the production and collection of data, the interpretative and critical action-research paradigms are utilized, while for the data analysis, qualitative content analysis is employed.

Kabadayi (2012) points out that a short film is a type of cinematic production that attempts to present its subject in a short amount of time, and as such, it organizes its structure in an impressive way. She explores the relationship between education and short films and the role of short films in education, with a sample of high school students and university students majoring in Media Studies. Using a questionnaire, students' and university students' views on short films were revealed, supporting that short films are easy to use for educational purposes, both in terms of production and consumption.

Similarly, Spyrou and Sofos (2017) argue that short films and their use in education involve many important prerequisites for students and educators to be active participants in successful teaching. The specific characteristics of short films further reinforce this, as a short film is defined as a film with a duration of less than 30 minutes. There are significant examples of creators dedicated to this type of film, exploring its aesthetic possibilities, transforming it into a distinctive, self-contained form of cinematic art in the history of cinema (Kalambakas & Kyriakoukas, 2015: 20). The small scale of a 5, 15, or 25-minute film allows, perhaps even requires, an extreme linguistic condensation in its writing, which exercises a unique, different charm on the viewer. The short film, therefore, is a highly condensed cinematic genre. In the short time it lasts, ideas, messages, meanings, and the entire cinematic language are condensed. Whether in narrative (if it is fictional) or in cinematic articulation, short films open up particular expressive possibilities that the creator can and must exploit (Spyrou & Sofos, 2017). Therefore, a short film is not simply a miniature of feature films, nor does it follow the same structural standards, but it uses the same expressive tools (Kalambakas & Kyriakoukas, 2015: 20).

Poulios (2019), in the context of his doctoral thesis, focusing on the dimension of otherness related to the existence of disability, investigated and evaluated the impact of a short film program on the attitudes of students in the last two grades of Primary Education towards students with disabilities or Special Educational Needs, regarding their integration into the school environment. The results showed more positive views from non-disabled children towards children with disabilities, as well as a greater degree of acceptance of the latter, after watching the films. It is also noted that children who were involved in creating their own short film on disability showed more positive attitudes towards children with disabilities, concluding that cinema can be utilized in the school environment to raise students' awareness and influence their attitudes towards individuals with Special Educational Needs or disabilities, as well as other social groups or social issues.

Furthermore, as noted in a cinema education manual by the British film education organization "Into Film" (https://www.intofilm.org/), titled "Teaching Literacy Through Film", some advantages of short films compared to feature films include that they can usually be shown in full during a single lesson, allowing for repeated screenings for students to gain detailed familiarity with the work. They are not necessarily governed by the same conventions as feature films and can be more "unconventional", provoking stronger reactions than "traditional" films. They can also serve as an easily manageable and motivating stimulus for developing basic skills.

The "CINEducation" program

In Greece, in recent years, there has been significant interest in film education, primarily driven by certain private entities. Various programs have been developed or are being developed that focus on the use of art works in education, including the use of cinematic art (Kalambakas, 2012; Kokkos, 2011). Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience: Developing a Method. In A. Kokkos and Collaborators, Education through the Arts (pp. 71-120). Athens: Metaichmio Publications). However, the use of films in the educational process remains fragmented. Despite some recent initiatives from the state in the field of audiovisual and film education, cinema is essentially absent from the formal curriculum of Greek schools. It only exists as a subject in "special type" schools, and is rather an auxiliary medium, outside official teaching practice, with its usage depending on the initiative of educators.

Given these circumstances and considering that educators are simultaneously the "object" and "subject" of any desired educational and social change (Guskey, 2002; Villegas-Reimers, 2003), an original experiential training program for educators entitled "CINEducation" was designed and implemented as part of a PhD thesis on the contribution of film to educators' training for the development of intercultural competence (Roumpou, 2024). The theoretical foundation of the research and training program is critical pedagogy, the principles of intercultural and inclusive education, adult education –specifically transformative learning and person-centered education, experiential learning, education through art and action research. All these aspects place individual and subjective experience, otherness, and the transformative qualities and potential of education and cinematherapy at the center.

The structure of the program is based on a gradual, intervening (Lobrot, 2015), non-directive (Freinet pedagogy, interpretive, person-centered, and critical pedagogy) discovery of knowledge and the development of skills and attitudes that promote the principles of intercultural education, using films as a means of personal and professional development within an action research framework (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 2001). Specifically, the program aims to contribute to the field of intercultural education by developing and "testing" an innovative method that utilizes film art and cinematherapy, responding to the increasing need and demand for educators' training with and in new tools.

In the context of the CINEducation program, cinema is approached both as a mass communication medium and as a cultural asset capable of shaping opinions and attitudes. The presence of cinema in education is considered without focusing exclusively on cinema as a teaching medium or on film education as an art form, as it is believed that in educational practice the aesthetic experience cannot be isolated from the acquisition of knowledge in a specific cognitive subject. The film, in particular, is understood as a work of art and a cultural product, which, when appropriately utilized in education and employed as a projection medium/method/technique, with the main method of reception and processing being cinematherapy, can lead to the complete or partial "transformation" of the viewer through "projections" and "identifications" (Wolz, 2005, 2010).

The innovation of the presented approach lies in the systematic use of films and techniques of film education with cinematherapy as the primary method of reception and processing of the films, aimed at developing the intercultural competence of educators at all levels.

The films used were either feature-films provided by a domestic organization focused on film education and audiovisual communication, or they were short films freely distributed on the internet. The selected films address various aspects of life and

issues related to all forms of diversity (ethnocultural identity, gender, health/illness, lifestyle, socio-economic inequality, age, stereotypes and prejudices), as well as educational topics such as the role of the teacher and students, methods and means of teaching and learning, etc. The films were chosen based on a variety of factors including their content, their length (feature films vs. short films), narrative style (comedy, drama, social, etc.), cinematic techniques, country of origin, and production year, as well as gender representation in the direction of the films. Additionally, legal access to the films concerning intellectual property rights was also considered. The goal was to provide access to and familiarize participants with as wide and diverse variety of forms of cinematic forms as possible, as this is also a goal of film education) (British Film Institute –BFI, https://www.bfi.org.uk/), without necessarily focusing on the "high aesthetic value" (Kokkos, 2011: 91-92) of each selected film for the program.

The approach of this program avoids reading the films strictly in terms of their fidelity to a given reality. Instead, they are seen as a platform for expressing different ideological discourses that either reproduce or critique the ideologies present in the social environment. Consequently, it is not possible to speak of "intercultural content" of the film in the way it is discussed in the relevant literature (see Pentini, 2011; Stergiou, 2013). In the context of this work, the term "intercultural" refers to the educational material used to promote intercultural education, meaning the familiarization, acceptance and development of respect for any kind of diversity.

This work, moreover, advocates the position that there are no "suitable" or "unsuitable" films, but rather appropriate or inappropriate ways of utilizing them, depending on the readiness of the teacher and students to handle the film in question. This involves considering their audiovisual and, specifically, cinematic literacy levels.

Furthermore, the communication goal of the creator takes a secondary role, as the objective is not for students to adopt a specific stance (Blasco, Moreto, Blasco, Levites & Janaudis, 2015), but rather to promote reflection and, through this reflection, to foster constructive discussion. The primary importance is placed on the film's ability to offer multiple interpretive approaches, allowing for both an exploration of reality and self-awareness.

In general, the originality and attractiveness of the films chosen, along with the accompanying materials developed, as well as their ability to engage with different cognitive levels and learning methods, were also factors taken into account. The goal of the entire teaching and learning process was for the films and related activities to serve as stimuli for participants to reflect on the stereotypical and prejudiced views and attitudes they often adopt, assuming these are social and cultural "truths." Over time, the aim was for them to transform negative perceptions and behaviors towards diversity and, more generally, to perceive cultural variety and difference as a social asset rather than a threat.

Methods

The research aimed to design, implement, and evaluate an experiential training program for educators focused on developing intercultural competence through the use of film and cinematherapy. The objective was to raise awareness among educators at various levels regarding intercultural issues and diversity management, while also familiarizing them with cinematic media and film education.

Methodologically, the study adopted a qualitative research paradigm, utilizing interpretative and critical frameworks from action research for data collection and analysis. Qualitative content analysis was employed to analyze the gathered data.

Films were sourced from a domestic organization specializing in film education and included short films available online, chosen for their relevance to themes such as ethno-cultural identity, gender, health, lifestyle, socio-economic inequality, age, stereotypes, and educational issues. Selection criteria included a variety of genres and formats (feature and short films), narrative styles (comedy, drama, social commentary), and considerations of gender representation in direction, as well as compliance with intellectual property rights. This approach aimed to expose participants to a broad spectrum of film art, aligning with goals outlined by the British Film Institute (BFI).

The program emphasized that films should not be read merely as reflections of reality but as platforms for articulating diverse ideological discourses that critique or reproduce societal ideologies (Blasco, Moreto, Blasco, Levites, & Janaudis, 2015). The communicative intent of filmmakers was considered secondary; instead, the focus was on promoting reflection and constructive discussion among participants. The films' potential for multiple interpretations was highlighted, facilitating deeper engagement with both social realities and personal introspection.

Ultimately, the teaching and learning process aimed to use cinematherapy and related activities to encourage participants to critically examine their stereotypical and biased views, often perceived as social and cultural "truths." The goal was to facilitate a gradual transformation in their perceptions and behaviors towards diversity, recognizing cultural variety as a valuable asset rather than a threat.

Cycle A of Action Research: Distance Learning Intervention

Following the initial design of the program, the A cycle of "CINEducation" was implemented online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This cycle included 13 online meetings with a diverse group of 15 members, comprising both substitute and permanent educators from primary and secondary education, special educational and support staff, audiovisual specialists, and two "critical friends" who served as observers. During these meetings, various activities were tested, drawing from existing programs and models. These activities were adapted and enriched to align with the specific goals of this program. Different group dynamics were explored, including simultaneous, group, and individual film viewings. As a result of this process, 10 films were selected, along with associated activities and the overall methodology to be utilized in the face-to-face workshops of the B cycle of action research. This collaborative and adaptive approach aimed to enhance the effectiveness of the training and ensure it met the participants' needs.

Cycle B of Action Research: In-Person Intervention

Using the snowball method, eight teachers were selected for the in-person intervention, ensuring a diverse range of characteristics, including gender, age, specialty, education and training, work experience, and representation from various types of educational institutions (e.g., preschool, primary, secondary, and vocational schools). Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with these participants.

The training intervention consisted of 50 hours and included twelve workshops focused on exploring intercultural education and promoting film education. Supported by one educator as a participating observer and two "critical friends," the intervention employed various methods, including questionnaires, focus groups, observation, and experiential approaches. The activities developed could be used by educators before and after film viewings with their students, encompassing energizing exercises, prompts for reflection and opportunities for expressing opinions and feelings.

The primary aim of the intervention was to raise awareness about diversity and interculturality, utilizing techniques from film education and cinematherapy to develop intercultural competence. Participants were introduced to theoretical and practical tools designed to foster a positive atmosphere through the power of visual storytelling, enhancing communication, mutual understanding, and creativity through experiential learning.

Films served as the main medium in this experiential intervention, acting as catalysts for activities that familiarized participants with film language and audiovisual techniques in education. Cinematherapy was the primary method for processing films, enabling participants to explore their opinions, attitudes, and feelings, develop self-awareness, and identify elements of their personal identities while finding commonalities with others.

Throughout the training, participants examined concepts related to personal and group identities, self-determination, diversity, and interculturality through experiential activities and film therapy tools. Issues such as educator identity, stereotypes, and discrimination were addressed using adult education techniques, including group work, brainstorming, reframing, and reflective practices.

Theoretical concepts were clarified, and participants were practically engaged with research methods and techniques (e.g., action research, focus groups, evaluation). After completing the in-person training, they were encouraged to design and implement similar interventions in their educational contexts, promoting the principles of intercultural and film education in the C cycle of action research.

Cycle C of Action Research: Application in the Classroom

After completing the training, educators were encouraged to design and implement similar interventions in their classrooms to promote the principles of intercultural education. Non-participant observation was conducted to assess the effectiveness of these interventions. Additionally, educators were invited to engage in self-evaluation, reflecting on their experiences and the impact of the activities on their students. This process aimed to reinforce their learning and foster continuous improvement in their approach regarding intercultural competence.

The "Follow-Up" Process: "One Year Later…"

After a significant period following the completion of the training intervention, the participating educators were asked to reflect on their experiences. They identified and evaluated any qualitative changes in their practices related to intercultural issues and diversity management. Educators were encouraged to report on shifts in their personal identities and how extensively they had incorporated films and the methods developed during the training into their educational work. This follow-up process aimed to assess the long-term impact of the training on their teaching practices and personal growth, fostering ongoing reflection and development in their approach to intercultural education.

Findings: *The Experience of the Educators*

Regarding the findings related to short films in the research, it was found that all participating educators, regardless of educational level, chose to use short films—both those shown in the context of the "CINEducation" program and those of their own selection. They considered factors such as the age of their students, their specific interests, the content of the film (the topics it addresses), and the duration of the film. The duration was particularly important either due to time constraints during teaching hours or because shorter films are easier for students to understand and maintain attention. As one participant remarked: "*I am amazed at how many things we can see*

in short films… and how many things we can analyze… I never imagined that from a few-minute-long film we could discuss for three hours."

A characteristic example is from E.M.K., a primary school teacher, who explained in a reflective piece: "*To manage teaching time efficiently, the teacher thought of experimenting by preparing the students minimally, so they could have an initial contact with some basic prerequisite concepts (intercultural competence and its indicative dimensions, conscious film viewing, and analysis of film frames). A month before implementing the planned educational scenario, the teacher scheduled the screening of another short film to familiarize the students with some guidelines for conscious viewing, and the creation of character grids according to Film Matrix combined with Self Matrix (as per Wolz's applied model of cinema therapy), which the teacher planned to use in the final educational scenario."*

Other teachers also emphasized choosing short films based on age appropriateness and the nature of the film, as seen in the following quotes: "*I also chose this specific film because it was short, so the children wouldn't get tired due to their age, and it was animation, which is an enjoyable genre for preschool children.*" (N.E.)
"*The use of cinema was chosen, specifically an animated short film, because cinema appeals to children, conveying visual and auditory messages in an engaging way through the screen. Preschool children are familiar with animation, both from television and films as well as from electronic games.*" (S.X.)
"*I chose a short film to complete its viewing and start the initial activities within one teaching hour, so the children wouldn't get tired and lose focus due to external factors (break time-noise). This film was chosen because of the themes it addresses and the similarity between the ages of the characters and those of the students, which helps achieve the overall goal of the teaching scenario, making it easier for students to identify with the characters. This is in line with the cinema therapy model used in the scenario.*" (A.G.)

Moreover, teachers highlighted the need to select films based on students' film literacy and the accessibility of films due to copyright concerns, as seen in the following: "*The short film is chosen due to the students' unfamiliarity with cinema as a teaching tool and because of its free access on the internet.*" (A.G.)
"*The chosen film is suitable for children of this age* [elementary school] *because it's an animated short with modern design, a fast pace, and rapid scene changes—elements that children are familiar with and that will likely attract their attention. Additionally, it's an allegory with many possible interpretations, some of which children may find particularly relevant, given the current situation (the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine).*" (E.M.K.)

Discussion

Following the training program, educators reported a change in their approach to watching films and expressed a desire to integrate cinema into their teaching. Before the program, there was hesitation, either due to unfamiliarity with the medium or because they felt that teaching time was insufficient for utilizing films.

It was noted that all participating teachers, regardless of educational level, chose to use short films during classroom implementation, selecting both films shown in the "CINEducation" program, which they generally found to be "*appropriate*" and "*effective,*" and those of their own choosing. They considered various factors in their selections, including the age of their students, their interests, the themes the films addressed, and the duration of the films —either due to limited time during teaching hours or because short films are easier for students to understand and maintain focus.

The findings strengthen the conclusions of Angelis' (2016) study on adult educators, which identified barriers to the use of cinema in education, including the lack of appropriate infrastructure, time constraints (long film durations and pressure to cover the curriculum), pedagogical challenges, a lack of related training, difficulties accessing appropriate films, and concerns about potential disruptive effects of showing films. The findings confirm Kabadayi's (2012) conclusion that short films are ideal for educational purposes, as they are easy to use in terms of consumption, structured to present the subject matter concisely and compellingly. It also aligns with the views of Spyrou and Sofos (2017) as well as Kalampakas & Kyriakoukos (2015: 20), who emphasize the potential of short films in education, noting that short films and their use in education involve numerous important conditions for successful teaching. They both highlight the unique characteristics of short films and their ability to condense ideas, messages, meanings and the entire cinematic language into a short time frame.

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