

Διάλογοι! Θεωρία και πράξη στις επιστήμες αγωγής και εκπαίδευσης

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Πρωθώντας τη συνεργασία σχολείου-οικογένειας στο πλαίσιο της διαπολιτισμικής εκπαίδευσης μέσα από την αναδιοργάνωση του αύλειου χώρου του νηπιαγωγείου. Το παράδειγμα της υπαίθριας βιβλιοθήκης.

Zoi Konstantinidou, Alexandra Gkloumpou

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Promoting school-family cooperation in multicultural learning environments. An example of an outdoor library.

Zoe Konstantinidou¹, Alexandra Gkloumpou²

^{1,2}Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Abstract

The kindergarten's classroom library is organized according to different pedagogical and teaching practices. The present educational program aimed at the creation of a library at the kindergarten's courtyard, following the participatory design. The basic aim was the active participation of all children and their families considering the characteristics of their sociocultural environment and highlighting their significant role in the creation of common literacy experiences through the utilization of their culture. The program was developed in a public kindergarten in Crete, with a sample of 17 children, 10 of native and 7 of different migrant origins (foreign N=4, local N=2, bilingual N=1), aged 4-6 years old. The methodological tools of the Mosaic Approach, Information and Communication Technologies, cooperative learning and a thinking routine were used. The evaluation showed that the creation of the outdoor library significantly enhanced the interactions and the cooperation between teachers, children and parents and their active participation in multicultural educational literacy activities.

Keywords: *outdoor library, multicultural learning environments, space, school-family cooperation, preschool education*

Πρωθώντας τη συνεργασία σχολείου-οικογένειας στο πλαίσιο της διαπολιτισμικής εκπαίδευσης μέσα από την αναδιοργάνωση του αύλειου χώρου του νηπιαγωγείου. Το παράδειγμα της υπαίθριας βιβλιοθήκης.

Περίληψη

Η οργάνωση και λειτουργία της γωνιάς της βιβλιοθήκης στην τάξη ακολουθεί διαφορετικές παιδαγωγικές και διδακτικές προσεγγίσεις. Το παρόν εκπαιδευτικό πρόγραμμα επιχείρησε την οργάνωση μίας υπαίθριας βιβλιοθήκης, στον αύλειο χώρο του νηπιαγωγείου, με συμμετοχικό σχεδιασμό. Βασικός στόχος ήταν η ενεργητική εμπλοκή στην λειτουργία της όλων των παιδιών και των οικογενειών τους λαμβάνοντας υπόψη το κοινωνικοπολιτισμικό περιβάλλον τους και αναδεικνύοντας τον σημαντικό τους ρόλο στη δημιουργία κοινών αναγνωστικών εμπειριών μέσα από την αξιοποίηση της πολιτισμικής τους κουλτούρας. Το πρόγραμμα υλοποιήθηκε σε μια τάξη δημόσιου νηπιαγωγείου της Κρήτης με παιδιά γηγενή (N=10) και παιδιά διαφορετικής πολιτισμικής προέλευσης (αλλοδαπά N=4, ημεδαπά N=2, δίγλωσσα N=1),

Υπεύθυνος επικοινωνίας: Ζωή Κωνσταντινίδου, konstzoe@nured.auth.gr, PhD, Νηπιαγωγός, Αριστοτέλειο Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλονίκης

Correspondent author: Zoe Konstantinidou, konstzoe@nured.auth.gr, PhD, Kindergarten teacher, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

ηλικίας 4-6 ετών. Χρησιμοποιήθηκαν εργαλεία από την προσέγγιση του Μωσαϊκού, όπως επίσης και οι Τεχνολογίες Πληροφορικής και Επικοινωνιών (ΤΠΕ), η εργασία σε ομάδες και η δημιουργία ρουτίνας σκέψης, προκειμένου να δημιουργηθεί ένα πλαίσιο πολλαπλής ακρόασης. Από την αξιολόγηση προέκυψε ότι η δημιουργία της υπαίθριας βιβλιοθήκης ενίσχυσε σημαντικά τις αλληλεπιδράσεις και τη συνεργασία παιδιών και γονέων στον χώρο του σχολείου καθώς και τις σχέσεις σχολείου-οικογένειας δημιουργώντας μία κοινότητα πρακτικής και μάθησης.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: *υπαίθρια βιβλιοθήκη, πολυπολιτισμικά περιβάλλοντα μάθησης, χώρος, συνεργασία σχολείου οικογένειας, προσχολική εκπαίδευση*

Introduction

Outdoor school spaces provide a wide range of stimuli and constitute a dynamic field of action and interaction between the subjects who act in them, contributing to various aspects of their development (Gessiou & Sakellariou, 2020; Gkloumpou & Dimitriou, 2024). Such spaces support the development of different types of play (Harris, 2017) as well as the development of imagination and creativity (Kwon, 2022). Educational activities conducted in outdoor environments offer flexible, multisensory and playful learning opportunities (Nicol & Waite, 2020; Restall, 2021), while fostering cooperation and social competencies (Ramsey, 2015). These activities provide authentic motivation for learning, which is considered essential in multicultural educational contexts (Natalini, 2024). In particular, outdoor storytelling has proven especially effective for students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Zafeiroudi & Kouthouris, 2021).

Outdoor school spaces can function as learning environments equivalent to indoor classrooms (Stadler-Altman, 2021) by transferring the curriculum from the classroom to the schoolyard. This transition contributes to the acquisition and deeper understanding of concepts (Clark, 2010; Kwon, 2022). Outdoor school libraries represent one such learning environment: they provide spaces for reading, play, creativity, and social interaction (Polyzou et al., 2021), enhancing children's learning experiences and strengthening family engagement within the school community (Campana et al., 2022). In our educational program, we sought to redesign the kindergarten's courtyard space, on a limited scale, through a participatory design approach. In this method, the (re)design of a space is based in the needs and aspirations of its users (Clark, 2010; Gourgiotou & Ouggrinis, 2015). These needs are identified by listening to children's voices as they express their perceptions and experiences of their physical environment-cultivating environmental literacy and fostering a community of active listening, inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy (Clark, 2010; Rinaldi, 2021). The way and the degree in which children are involved as users and co-designers in the design of their school spaces reflects their position and role in these spaces (Katsavounidou, 2023).

Parental involvement, in the design and use of school environments (Clark, 2010), contributes significantly to the development of interactions and the formation of new relationships among children, teachers and families. Research further demonstrates that cooperation between family and school positively influences children's academic achievement (Birbili & Roufidou, 2019). Particularly within multicultural education, schools that establish a framework of multiple listening-allowing both children and parents the space and time for active participation in educational activities-can cultivate a more inclusive curriculum (Magos, 2022; Stamatoglou & Konstantinidou, 2025).

Multilingual activities enhance communication among children, fostering respect for linguistic and cultural diversity and promoting intercultural understanding (Cummins, 2001; Garcia & Wei, 2014). Providing opportunities for expression in each child's first language strengthens participation (Cenoz & Gorter, 2015) linguistic flexibility and communication skills (European Commission, 2015). In this way, an inclusive frame is cultivated, reducing inequalities and marginalization that may arise from linguistic exclusion (Cummins, 2000; García, et al., 2017; Heugh, 2025). Based on the above principles of multicultural learning environments, the flexible use of the schoolyard, and parental involvement in specific aspects of the kindergarten curriculum, our program aimed at:

- Engage children in multilingual activities through verbal and non-verbal communication;
- Involve children in participatory design processes to create an outdoor library in the schoolyard; and
- Strengthen interactions between school and families in multicultural contexts through both a digital classroom (the Ministry of Education's electronic learning platform *e-me*) and direct participation in educational activities.

Implementation

This educational intervention was carried out in a public kindergarten located in a semi-urban island area and involved 17 children aged 4 to 6 years (N = 10 boys, N = 7 girls). Among the participants, three children were non-Greek - two bilingual and one monolingual who only spoke their first language-while two other participants were semi-native bilinguals. Among the parents of non-native children, three were monolingual.

The program lasted for one month, during which the children engaged daily with the library through semi-structured activities. Upon completion of the intervention, the library was relocated to the semi-outdoor area, allowing children to access and use it freely, according to their interests and needs until the end of the school year.

For data collection and evaluation, the kindergarten teacher's diary entries were used, based on systematic observation, complemented by interviews with the children, and related drawing activities. Thematic analysis was employed for data coding into categories and subcategories corresponding to the parameters of the program: (a) the utilization of space and flexible materials, (b) the children's engagement in multilingual activities and (c) cooperation between school and home.

An exploratory approach was adopted, using narrative tools derived from the Mosaic Approach (Clark, 2010). These tools included photography, map-making, interviews, book creation and guided tours- designed and conducted by the children, which supported both the participatory (re)design and pedagogical use of the outdoor school space. Cooperative learning was also implemented with children working both as a whole group and in small, mixed-ability groups, sometimes with and sometimes without parental involvement. A range of teaching strategies-such as histograms, brainstorming, thinking routines, digital class activities (via *e-me*), digital tools, and storytelling-were also employed to promote cooperation and strengthen school-family relationships within a multicultural educational context.

The program was structured into four phases:

Phase 1 – Introduction to the concept of the library:

Children were introduced to the concept, structure, and function of a library. They were encouraged to seek information, engage with experts, and cooperate with members of the local community.

Phase 2 – Design of the outdoor library:

Children envisioned and designed the features they wanted their outdoor library to include. Suitable materials were identified and collected to support the construction phase.

Phase 3 – Family engagement:

Families were encouraged to participate actively. Children sought, transferred, and shared reading experiences, engaging cooperatively with their family members in literacy-related activities within the home environment.

Phase 4 – Creation and operation of the outdoor library:

Children organized the outdoor library by redesigning and reorganizing the schoolyard, materials, and equipment. They then shared collective reading experiences with their families in the newly created outdoor learning space (Figure 1).

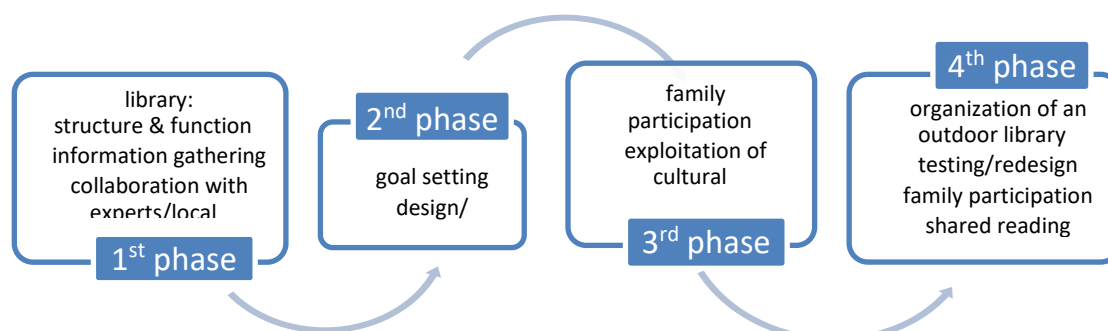


Figure 1.

The phases of the outdoor library creation

Phase 1: Discovering the structure and function of a library

Gathering Information

At early childhood stages, emphasis is placed on familiarizing children with books as physical and cultural objects-particularly on understanding their content, purpose, structure, and morphological elements (Penderi et al., 2022). In this phase, children were encouraged to search for different kinds of books at home and explore how they are used, by whom and for what purposes. Then, they brought their books to school to present them to the class and discuss similarities and differences related to language, narrative structure and the cultural context in which each story was developed.

During the presentations, one child remarked *“I took it (the book) from my sister’s library. She has many (books) but this is my favorite”*. This spontaneous comment prompted a discussion about what a library is and what purposes it serves. Initially, children expressed their preliminary ideas about the structure and function of a library recalling personal experiences and sharing their opinions and perspectives with their peers. To deepen their understanding, children conducted short interviews -organized with the teachers’ guidance - with members of their families to collect more information about libraries. The teachers formed small, mixed ability groups and encouraged cooperation as the children brainstormed questions they wanted to ask. Through discussion, they proposed ideas and ultimately selected the most relevant questions, such as:

“Where do you find books when you want to read?”

“Do you have a library in your house/room?”

“Describe what it is like and how you use it.”

“Have you ever visited a public library? Describe your experience”.

To help them remember their questions, the children recorded them on small pieces of paper using drawings. Each group then combined its drawings to create a small visual interview guide.

The groups shared their collected information with the whole class. To support children in clarifying their prior knowledge and identifying new areas of inquiry, the teachers implemented the “Know–Want to Know–Learned” (K–W–L) thinking routine. The second column (“Want to Know”) was visualized using a histogram as a teaching tool: each ray represented an aspect of investigation, along which the children organized the materials they had gradually collected. These materials included images, symbols, drawings, narratives, photographs, objects, and artifacts produced individually and cooperatively in small groups. This process remained dynamic and ongoing throughout the activity, maintaining children’s engagement and enabling connections between different parameters of their inquiry (Figure 1). The evolving visual narrative (of the information) helped children monitor their knowledge development and exchange information at a pace appropriate to their individual and group learning processes.



Figure 2

The histogram as a tool for monitoring and classifying investigative information

Cooperation with experts and the local community

The children participated in a virtual tour of the city's municipal library, through a video conference with the librarians. This experience allowed them to observe the library's space, furniture, and equipment, and to communicate directly with the librarians about how books are borrowed and how the space is used. During the design activity that followed, the children were encouraged to capture their questions and observations using a variety of expressive modes. They recorded symbols, drawings, and emergent writing in their notes, while in some cases they asked the kindergarten teacher to act as a *secretary*, writing down their narratives and comments. Following the digital tour, the librarians directed the children to the municipal library's official website, where they could further explore their questions and access electronic resources relevant to their interests.

The material collected during and after the meeting was assembled by the children for discussion and used as a basis for selecting the rules of their own library (Figure 2.1). This process resulted in the creation of a poster composed of polymorphic material-images, drawings, symbols, captions, and other visual elements (Figure 2.2). These representations were later incorporated into the children's improvised outdoor library to provide multimodal information for both students and families. In this way, each participant-regardless of age or first language-was able to engage meaningfully and acquire knowledge through diverse forms of communication and representation.



Figure 2.1 Figure 2.2

Utilization of representations, symbols & multimodal texts

Phase 2: The idea of the outdoor library

Aim setting

In this phase, teachers and children cooperatively explored the internet to discover different types of libraries around the world. Together, they suggested keywords, used voice dictation to enter them on the computer, and visited relevant websites. The children observed a variety of library designs-spiral, multi-story, private, and public-each characterized by unique architectural features and diverse collections of books. During

their exploration, the children came across an online article that mentioned an improvised library. Following their expressed interest, the kindergarten teacher extended the search to include alternative forms of libraries—such as mobile, outdoor, and temporary ones—examining the reasons for their creation and their modes of operation. The children compared these with conventional libraries, identifying similarities and differences and discussing how different local conditions and needs influenced their design and organization (Figure 3).

This new knowledge inspired the children to design their own alternative library within the kindergarten. The teachers facilitated a brainstorming session to collect children’s ideas and encouraged them to vote for their preferred concept. Through this process, the children collectively decided to create an *outdoor library* in the school courtyard—a space where they could read with their friends during school hours and with their families during arrival and departure times at the kindergarten.



Figure 3

The children’s search for information about alternative libraries

Participatory Design

Kindergarten teachers encouraged children’s active participation in the design of the outdoor space by employing methodological tools from the *Mosaic Approach*. They invited the children to map the school courtyard to visualize how they imagined the structure and layout of their future library. Through guided tours around the courtyard, the teachers prompted the children to photograph their favorite areas as well as the spots they considered most suitable for creating the outdoor library. These photographs were then projected in the classroom and discussed collectively in plenary sessions.

Following these discussions, each group cooperated to design its own version of the outdoor library. The four groups presented their ideas to the class, after which the children jointly decided to organize their new library within the existing wooden play structure (the large slide) located in the courtyard. They justified their choice by explaining that the structure could accommodate many people, included two distinct sections, provided shade, and resembled “the towers from fairy tales,” as two girls characteristically remarked. These ideas and justifications were represented in the map

the children produced, which was accompanied by a list of necessary materials for the library's completion-such as books, carpet, pillows, and benches (Figure 4).



Figure 4

Left: List of materials needed for the outdoor library

Right: Map of the outdoor library structure

Phase 3: Incentives for family participation

Searching for books in the local socio-cultural environment

In this phase, children were invited to collect materials for the outdoor library. Simultaneously, the digital classroom platform was used to share the children's findings and to invite families to actively participate in the project. It should be noted that school-family cooperation through the active involvement of parents in the learning process, facilitated by this platform, was an established practice and part of the classroom culture. Parents and children were encouraged to explore books within their family environment and to cooperatively design an alternative library at home. This activity provided children with the opportunity to observe and address the challenges involved in organizing a library and selecting appropriate materials. Subsequently, families shared photographs and comments on the digital platform, showcasing the personal libraries they had created at home using carts, boxes, or shelves. They also explained the rationale behind the selection of specific spaces and materials for their home libraries (Figure 5).



Figure 5

Creating makeshift libraries at home

During this phase, children, together with their families, selected materials to be included in the kindergarten's outdoor library. The selections included books, fables, and stories in multiple languages, chosen based on various criteria such as illustrations, text complexity, sounds, audio narrations, and music-embedded lyrics. For example, one child explained, "Dad reads some big books that are difficult because they only have very small letters and no pictures. I got this one from my sister that has lots of pictures and we can read it by ourselves." Another child noted: "This is my favorite fairy tale. It has pictures that grow (3D) and sounds, and I read it before I go to sleep. I read the pictures, and mom reads the letters." Children from migrant backgrounds identified books in both their first language and the host language, commenting, "This book has other (English) letters like the ones my mom reads." These selections aimed to provide materials accessible to multiple readers through visual, auditory, and narrative modes, supporting the multilingual and multicultural learning environment of the outdoor library.

Phase 4: Encouraging the creation of shared reading experiences

In the final phase, children managed all materials collected during the previous phases and organized the outdoor library according to their own preferences. Each group was assigned tasks by the teacher, who presented the options and allowed the children to choose their responsibilities. Specifically:

- One group selected and arranged furniture (chairs, tables, easels).
- Another group organized carpets and pillows.
- A third group arranged and shelved the books.
- The fourth group created and edited the signs and library rules.

During the redesign, children proposed modifications based on their observations and practical needs. For example, one child suggested adding fabrics from the raised ledge of the slide, which was enthusiastically incorporated. They tested the space, identifying both effective elements and areas needing adjustment. Cushions were found to be insufficient, prompting the inclusion of a large pouf. Books were placed in mobile carts rather than fixed bookcases to allow flexible movement around the courtyard, and wooden furniture was positioned on the lower ledge to facilitate safe transport. Large

cushions were placed in front of railings for comfort and safety, and the slide entrance was left open to preserve its play function.

The children designed small reading areas within the library for individual or small group activities. These areas could be combined to form larger spaces suitable for plenary sessions or group reading. The library was stocked with books in Greek, Albanian, and English, enabling all parents to read with their children. Books with pictures accompanied by audio and melodies were included for younger children. One child suggested recording parents' stories-particularly in foreign languages-to provide additional audio experiences, which led to the inclusion of a classroom recorder in the library.

Finally, the children conducted tours of the library for peers from another class, explaining all phases of its creation and participating in shared reading experiences. They also organized a reception for their families, allowing children, parents, and teachers to engage together in reading activities during breaks or upon arrival and departure from the kindergarten. This process fostered meaningful interactions and communication in a new learning space, one inspired and shaped by the ideas and needs of the children themselves.



Figure 6

Creation of an outdoor library in the school courtyard

Final Evaluation

Creating a library is common practice in the indoor space of kindergartens. The innovative aspect of this educational intervention was the creation of an outdoor library in the kindergarten courtyard through the active involvement of children in a participatory design process and its subsequent use of the new space by the children, teachers, and their families. Through participatory redesign and pedagogical utilization of the courtyard, a framework of multiple active listening (Rinaldi, 2021) was established, emphasizing the transfer and recognition of socio-cultural elements between family and school environments. In this way, the library was entirely created by the children at every stage. In Greece, children's participation in redesigning outdoor school spaces is notably limited, as reported by previous research (Gessiou & Sakellariou, 2020).

The use of the methodological tools of the Mosaic approach combined with children's testing and utilization of the space and materials was a critical factor in both redesigning the courtyard and strengthening interactions. Observations indicate that children's engagement in participatory design processes directly motivated the creation of an outdoor library fulfilling the program's second goal. The participatory procedures allowed the courtyard to avoid one-dimensional and stereotypical use, acquiring an anthropocentric dimension that integrated it into the educational process (Clark, 2010; Gkloumpou & Germanos, 2020).

Children were actively involved in multilingual activities exploring fundamental elements of verbal and non-verbal communication across cultures. They worked individually, in small groups, and plenary sessions, formulating targeted questions, structuring short interviews, and interacting with peers and adults both inside and outside the school context. This reciprocal transfer of learning between school and home-facilitated by ICT tools such as the digital classroom platform and digital library tours enabled children and families to engage in a discovery process highlighting each family's socio-cultural contributions and fostering communication and interaction (European Commission, 2015). Visualizing questions, whether in interactions with librarians or within the family and community environment, supported children's expression, enriched their spoken language, and enhanced the flow of their thoughts (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Wright, 2010). These findings support the first goal, demonstrating that the design and creation of the outdoor library increased children's engagement in multilingual verbal and non-verbal communication.

The creation of informative posters and boards further enhanced participation by providing multimodal information, serving as a "bridge" across language barriers, age differences between parents and children, and promoting each family's culture and heritage within the kindergarten setting (Kenner, 2004; Kress, 2010). Stories were shared in multiple languages, accompanied by symbols and cultural markers expressed through diverse characters and settings. Encouraging children and parents to create improvised libraries at home, using a variety of materials, established a key connection between kindergarten and family.

Post-activity interviews, conducted both individually and in groups, confirmed children's engagement and reflection. For instance, one child stated: *"I liked reading E's book. It had the same princess as mine, but it was in a place full of snow and sleds. I've never seen a sled up close..."* Portfolios further demonstrated the achievement of the third goal-school-family cooperation-as children highlighted their and their families' involvement in the outdoor library among the most enjoyable activities of the year.

Shared reading activities between children and parents fostered harmonious coexistence and intercultural interaction. Parents and children had opportunities for mutual exchange, discussing cultural elements (e.g., sledding, customs, traditions) depicted in books to create shared experiences. Monolingual parents read books in small groups while bilingual children acted as translators; children also narrated stories in their own languages, allowing peers to infer content through illustrations, tone, body language, and facial expressions. In cases where stories shared common plots but contained culturally distinct elements, children were able to follow and understand narratives more easily. These interactions-both in-person and via digital classroom activities-strengthened intercultural dialogue and confirmed the achievement of the program's third goal.

Cultural differences were not obstacles but were instead leveraged as pedagogical strengths, contributing to mutual enrichment (Goehlich, 2003).

One limitation was the exposure of the outdoor library to weather conditions, which rendered it non-permanent. In response, children, supported by the teacher, created a new semi-outdoor library in the covered courtyard, using similar equipment (Figure 7). Despite the limited duration of the original outdoor library, it provided children with opportunities to actively and autonomously participate in space design and reorganization, to consider their own needs and preferences, and to engage in shared reading experiences between school and family through multimodal and culturally rich communication.



Figure 7

The relocation of the library to the semi-outdoor space

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