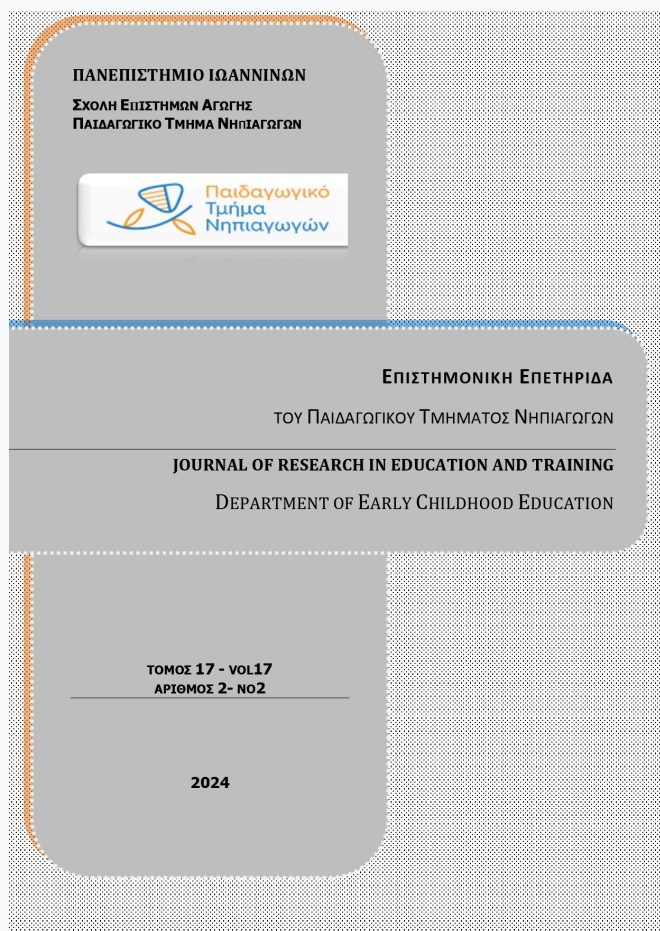


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Creative utilization of poetry in primary education: the case of Odysseas Elytis' in kindergarten.

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Abstract

In this paper we attempt to approach the issue of poetry in the modern Greek school, specifically at the kindergarten level, on a theoretical and practical basis. Starting from the need to free poetry and its pedagogical utilization from a conventional and sterile approach, we focus on the prerequisites for an essential didactic use of poetry, and we highlight the qualities that make Elytis's poetry accessible to kindergarten students. On a practical level we propose ideas and activities that serve a creative use of poetry in the context of preschool education.

Key-words: Elytis, poetry, creative utilization, kindergarten

Introduction

P. Valéry, French poet, writer and philosopher, used to say that poetry is “murdered” in schools. C. Charalampakis (2002: 69), Professor of Linguistics at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Athens and an Academician, through his study, recalls the - sad but apt – claim. Two decades after the death of Paul Valéry, Nobel laureate poet G. Seferis, passionately supports the diachronic course of the Greek poetic tradition and the need for its preservation and further continuation.¹ Addressing children, Seferis tried to pass on to them his belief in the value of poetry and in the peculiar logic that runs through poetic art. Anagnostopoulou (2002: 129) clarifies that addressing children, Seferis reserved special reference to the poetry of Odysseas Elytis² as a poetry that manages to relieve the child - as a reading recipient - from the limitations of didacticism and strict logic, characteristics that are appropriate, perhaps, in other sciences, but not in literature.

Although the educational, entertaining, and aesthetic value of literature is widely accepted, as well as the need to introduce it in the kindergarten curriculum³ (Karakitsios, 2005: 176,177), the place reserved for poetry and its didactic use by the modern Greek primary education system is far from the ideals and vision of both Valéry and our own Seferis and Elytis.

This position is strengthened by reports that poetry as a teaching subject at the educational level of kindergarten resembles more like a “poor relative” (Partheniou, 1997: 15-24). Moreover, the debate about whether literature – and consequently its enjoyment – can be considered teachable remains in many cases open (Kanatsouli, 2002: 154).

Therefore, the literary quality of poetry as well as the multiple benefits that a child can get from its contact with it are circumvented and often degraded. The fragmentary presence of selected poetic texts in modern primary school textbooks is only one more means of serving didactic purposes such

¹ G. Seferis' speech at the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in Stockholm here: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1963/seferis/speech/> (11/3/23).

² Odysseas Elytis (1911-1996) was one of the most important Greek poets. In 1979 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for his poetic work *The Axion Esti*. He was a member of the literary generation of '30. George Seferis, who was also awarded the Nobel Prize in 1963, belongs to the same generation.

³ It should be noted that the Greek Curriculum for the Preschool Education, in the subject of Language, specifically highlights the importance of students' contact with important authors and poets from the field of children's literature and poetry.

For more information here.

<https://blogs.sch.gr/2nipioan/files/2022/03/%CE%A0%CF%81%CF%8C%CE%B3%CF%81%CE%B1%CE%BC%CE%BC%CE%B1-%CE%A3%CF%80%CE%BF%CF%85%CE%B4%CF%8E%CE%BD-%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%B1-%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BD-%CE%A0%CF%81%CE%BF%CF%83%CF%87%CE%BF%CE%BB%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AE-%CE%95%CE%BA%CF%80%CE%B1%CE%AF%CE%B4%CE%B5%CF%85%CF%83%CE%B7-2021.pdf?x49127> (26/3/2024).

as familiarization with grammatical or syntactic phenomena (Anagnostopoulou, 2002: 130). She also focuses on the reasons that make preschool the most appropriate for the educational use of poetry (ibid.: 133).

The proximity between logic and imagination as well as the sensory discovery of the world are elements of clear identification between a preschool aged child and a poet. However, they also function as useful tools for the active participation of the child in the literary and poetic process.

It is worth noting that the child's personality is inextricably linked to what Elytis (1982: 19) recognized as the glamor of error, a characteristic that makes the child a compatible recipient of poetic creativity and of the freedom that naturally possesses it.

The contact of children with poetic creation within the framework of the educational process

It is particularly encouraging that the careful bibliographical search did not lead to expressed theories and scientific opinions that question the benefits of poetry for young readers. Therefore, moving away from the sterile and standardized educational use of poetry and ensuring an educational framework where students will have the opportunity to interact freely and creatively with poetry, through their direct and active involvement in poetic creation, emerges as a need but also as a challenge (Charalampakis, 2002: 69).

Let us not forget, after all, that "[...] freedom of the spirit is shaped by the educational system" (Ntokos, 2002: 61) and the strictly rational use of poetry has no place within an educational system that has the opportunity – but also the responsibility – to form free spirits.

Therefore, poetry needs to be recognized by the educational system and its functionaries as a "serious game" that can activate and strengthen all the intellectual skills of the child (ibid.: 63) providing that she manages to overcome the trap of compatibilities and limitations set by reason (Papadatos, 2002: 148). The multiple benefits of using poetry in the educational process are complemented by its proven contribution to students' emotional education (Pesketzi, 2002: 260).

It is within the framework of an educational philosophy and approach like this that the necessary conditions seem to be met in order to cultivate what Elytis himself (1982: 343) marked as «poetic intelligence». By this term he referred to one's ability to participate in poetry. In his opinion, this skill may be lacking in a wise mind, but exist in a simple person, why not in a child (ibid.).

Prerequisites for a successful teaching use of poetry in primary education

Vissaraki (2002: 180-184) refers to the conditions that partly ensure a successful didactic use of poetry at the primary level. Initially, she insists on the voluntary participation of students in the educational process and not on its imposition.

It is equally important that each student could follow his own personal rhythm depending on his experiences and not to be obliged to follow the rhythm of his peer group or the teacher's. The innate curiosity that characterizes children must be exploited and nourished even more during the educational process (ibid.).

At the same time, the teacher needs to maintain a coordinating and supportive role, avoiding trapping his students in closed-ended questions that do not serve the cultivation of their creative thinking neither their self-activity, their free self-expression, and the enjoyment of poetry, which must certainly precede its understanding (ibid.).

For Vissaraki (ibid.), the successful didactic use of poetry in primary education is decisively judged by whether the teacher manages to ensure to his students the role of signifier and co-creator through their active and direct involvement in the poetic process. As educators, we must put an end to the short-sighted treatment of poetry in the classroom. We owe our students a small "revolution".

Let us not forget, after all, that according to Paul Eluard a poet *is not the inspired one. He is the one who inspires*.⁴ This inspiration is what needs to be cultivated in today's school. In other words, the creative, multidimensional, interactive, and student-centered educational approach "[...] that will allow the young child to see poetry from the inside, to play with words, much as he plays with paints, plasticine and clay, to demystify the sanctity of poetic speech and to treat it as a mere construction" (Karakitsios, 2005: 179). In this way, the main issue which is the essential contact of the student with the magic of poetry through a redemptive, liberating process, is insured.

His straightforward judgment and his way of thinking make the preschool child a suitable recipient of poetry as an art. The child, perhaps more than an adult, can see this "almost invisible" that poets see.

Without underestimating the value of other types of poetry and their representatives, the poetry of the Nobel laureate Greek poet Odysseas Elytis meets several criteria that make it more suitable for

⁴ <https://www.gnomikologikon.gr/authquotes.php?auth=474> (30/4/2024).

its teaching use at the level of primary education and specifically in the wide student community of kindergarten.

The figurative dimension in the Odysseas Elytis's poetry

Some of the characteristic features of Elytis's poetry that can free young students from a one-dimensional and interpretively restrictive approach to poetry are the following:

- the iconographic approach
- the surrealist dimension
- the lack of strict literary rules
- the lyrical mood
- the optimistic look and
- the metaphorical use of speech (Pesketzi, 2002: 263)

The lack of punctuation that runs steadily and horizontally through Elytis' poetry is another characteristic that serves and facilitates its creative reading and its multiple interpretive rendering by each reader.

It is also worth mentioning that Elytis' poetry is characterized by unlimited possibilities of pedagogical use. Let's not forget that some of his poetry collections, such as *Ηλιος ο Πρώτος* [*Sun the First*] (1943), were written during the 1940 saga and are inspired by important historical events of recent Greek history. The symbolisms, the expressive ways and the meanings of Elytis can be used appropriately for the purpose of an indirect but effective contact of the students of the kindergarten with these historical events.

Iliopoulou⁵ (2022: 79) highlights as particularly constructive the contact of children with poetry in general and with Elytis poetry in particular through playful activities that are related to a variety of arts and use words as primary material and as an inspiration. As she indicatively states: "We may not become poets, but we will better understand what leads to poetry!" (ibid.).

⁵ Ioulita Iliopoulou is a female Greek poet. She is overall responsible for the work of Odysseas Elytis.

Proposals for the didactic use of Elytis' poetry at the educational level of kindergarten

In general

What is required is a multilevel and multidimensional didactic utilization of Elytis' poetry in preschool education. This can be achieved through innovative actions that will light up the transformative power of poetry as a form of expression and the multimodal nature of language as well. The creative collaboration of poetry with the arts of music, theatre, dance, and painting can prove particularly fertile.

Starting from the admission that "[...] a word is not something static and immovable but something alive that can change shape, form and content" (Damerment, 1990: 110-120), each teacher needs to instill in his young students the dynamic and changeable character of poetry. In the context of such an educational philosophy, the student understands that he is not only allowed, but he moreover must move freely and engage creatively in the poetic process, freeing himself from the role of passive reader or listener. The liberating dimension of poetry in preschool education is strongly supported by Karakitsios who suggests many innovative and original poetic experiences in kindergarten. For Karakitsios (2005: 182-183) the occasion for poetry can be given even through the simple observation of physical or weather phenomena. The spontaneous responses of young students to questions such as "What do you think that the almond blossom say to the sun?" or "What does the sun answer?" create images that can be gathered by the teacher and rendered in a textual poetical form. In a similar way, the teacher can mobilize the innate imagination of his students by asking them simple questions such as "What does this cloud look like?" and use their spontaneous answers poetically (ibid: 181).

Creating an educational poetry center in the kindergarten classroom

Everyday life in the educational environment of the kindergarten is thematically structured around the educational corners of activity. In our days we meet more often the term "centers of interest" or "activity centers". Aiming at their holistic development, we will there see young students engaged in mathematical, linguistic, artistic, musical, socio-emotional, or physical activities. The poetry corner can find its own space in the classroom, without, of course, implying the strict spatial limitation of these actions within its boundaries (something that would completely contradict the liberating climate we wish to establish in order to serve the spontaneous, active involvement of

students). Multisensory physical stimuli are necessary to mobilize children's imagination and cultivate students' language creativity. Therefore, the poetry corner is recommended to be organized near a window, so that children have direct access to visual, auditory, olfactory stimuli, which will essentially act as sources of inspiration and expression. Besides, many of the most important poems of world poetry began with Mother were nature as their starting point and were, as proven, inspired by something that the poet once heard, saw, smelled, touched.

Poems in plain sight

In the space which is dedicated to poetry and to a spontaneous engagement with it, we propose to have - as a first stimulus- poems and images of the poet with whose work the kindergarten teacher wishes to bring students into acquaintance and contact. In this case we will need images of Odysseas Elytis and a variety of his poetic texts in printed form. In this teaching proposal we will focus on Odysseas Elytis' poem titled «Κορίτσι» [“Girl”] from the collection *Ο Ήλιος ο Ηλιάτορας* [*The Soreign Sun*] (1971). It is an allegorical and symbolic poem. It has the form of a girls’ song wandering through a garden. In this dreamy garden the girl meets Mr. Μενεξέ, a fountain that gushes water, a pomegranate, and a blackberry. She also encounters surrealistic images, one of the main characteristics of the poetry of Elytis, such as a seer bee and a butterfly that bites.

At preschool age, when the child has not yet mastered the basic reading skills to move autonomously, the recitation by the teacher functions as an appropriate first contact of students with the poem. The evolution of technology enriches and equips educational everyday life with innovative applications that can be used in various ways even in kindergarten. Indicatively, we mention the possibility for printed poems already posted in the poetry corner to be accompanied by special QR codes which, with a simple scan, lead to recitation, melodic performances of poems and any relevant digitized material available. Specifically, the poem «Κορίτσι» [“Girl”] by O. Elytis may be accompanied by QR codes which refer (in Greek) to:

- a digitized melodic rendition of the poem accompanied by students' drawings⁶
- to recitation of the poem by children of the same (preschool) age⁷
- to school events and celebrations organized thematically around the work of the Nobel laureate poet⁸.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hqy2mjUmP24> (9/9/23).

⁷ Το κορίτσι (του κυρίου Μενεξέ) – Ηχοϊστορίες (ixoistories.gr) (9/9/23).

Artistic intervention and theatrical creative expression

After the first contact with the poem through the teacher's reading and through the additional technological resources already specified, students are motivated to express themselves artistically and of their own free will to choose and to visualize elements, objects, or persons they encountered in the text. Reading the poem, one will encounter, among others, Mr. Μενεξέ⁹, a πεντόβολο¹⁰, a garden, a fountain, a rose, a pomegranate, a raspberry, a bee, a butterfly. All this can be "enlivened" with the colors and imagination of young students. These figures can be cut by the teacher (or by the children if their familiarity with the use of scissors allows it) and will form the basis for a variety of playful linguistic, theatrical and expressive activities. We indicatively mention the following proposals for their educational utilization:

- The kindergarten teacher can invite students to organize spontaneous puppet performances with the figures they have created as heroes. Through similar techniques of animation of puppet theatre material, students are given the opportunity to take advantage of the undeniable pedagogical, entertaining, emotional and educational benefits of puppetry as an art.
- A blank canvas placed in the poetry corner can act as an empty landscape where students are invited to play creatively with their figures and improvise creating original combinations and spontaneous dialogues.
- Similarly – with poetry and painting encased within each other – the place of the blank canvas can be taken by other well-known paintings, where students can freely integrate their poetic figures by creating their own narratives and complementing the history of the paintings. This way improvisation is “triggered”. The stories spring up each time through children's imagination. Kindergarten students cultivate their aesthetic perception, strengthen their critical thinking, enrich their vocabulary, practice their oral expression. Eventually they discover that a painting is never just what we see at first place. Some history is always hidden behind it. Let's give them the opportunity to take a closer look and put their "magic finishing touch" with the goal of actively approaching art as opposed to its passive observation.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNdcH4fJkPE> (9/9/23).

⁹ The designation «Μενεξέ» stands for a flowering plant. In the poem we find «Μενεξέ» personified and appears as a man.

¹⁰ Team game dating back to ancient times. It is played with marbles, small stones or pebbles.

A box full of... poetry

The poetry corner can be further enriched and equipped with the "poetry box". Within it, the figures created for each poem by the students will be gathered along with other images that may have phonological and sound similarities. The image of a bee can be paired -due to their same ending sound- with a sea or a tree. A bear can match sonically with words such as chair, hair, or air. We already have the basis ready for original linguistic improvisations that through playful phonological activities bring kindergarten students into contact with the phenomenon of rhymes and rhymes.

At the same time, we propose the existence of a tightrope where children can hang their pictures successively using pegs¹¹, to construct their own poems. This way spontaneous original poems such as the following can emerge:

«Can you imagine seas full of trees and bees? »

«There once lived a bear that had long hair. She liked to sit in the chair and talk in the air».

How fun and creative at the same time! What is required, of course, is not the logical sequence or the correct spelling, but the contact of students with the dynamic character of words, the cultivation of improvisational skills, familiarity with the polysemy of words and their active involvement in poetic creation.

Cultivating critical thinking and imagination through free discussion

As part of the team's free discussion, the kindergarten teacher can challenge students' critical thinking by asking questions such as "Why is the poem titled "Girl"? Where can we find the girl in the poem?" or other hypothetical questions such as "If the fountain we encountered in the poem was not filled with water, what else could it be filled with?", "If there was a storm, how do you imagine the garden of the poem?", "If you could enter the poem, where would you like to be and what would you do?". «Who would you like to talk to and what would you say to him?» Students' answers can also be presented through painting or through dramatization activities.

Our favorite word. What can we do with it?

The teacher invites the student group -possibly divided into smaller groups- to choose their favorite word from among those they encountered in the poetic text and urges the young students to represent this word in the way they prefer. Indicatively, students can draw the word. They can also

¹¹ It should be noted that activities with pegs strengthen the fine movement skills of young children and properly prepare the acquisition of the functional grip of the pencil for their subsequent school course.

express it through musical improvisations or songs, create three-dimensional visual constructions with a variety of materials or experiment freely through kinetic activities.

Food for thought. Instead of an epilogue

The importance of a child's contact with the arts in general and the cultivation of social, cognitive, expressive, and emotional skills through them, has been supported by many scholars and scientists (Anagnostopoulou, 2002: 136).¹² Among the arts of theater, painting, music and dance that are institutionally included in the curriculum of modern kindergarten, poetry justifiably claims the formalization of its value and place in the educational context of primary education. The kindergarten student can be considered as a potentially compatible recipient of poetry. The pedagogical system of early childhood education needs to emerge as a compatible donor. Joyce Meyer, American author, speaker and Bible teacher, believes that "Teachers can change lives with the right combination of chalk and challenges."¹³ Disengaging from repetitive and short-sighted practices, overcoming rationality and the compatibilities of logic and boldness as an asset in educational work are the very first step we must make if our goal is to provide Kindergarten students with a free and creative educational framework where they can explore and creatively discover the magic of poetry. The common denominator of the inexhaustible ideas for the didactic use of poetry in kindergarten should be that poetry, in the end, is not something that should be "given" in a prefabricated way by the teacher but something that needs to be "emerged" in an experiential way by the child.

¹² The multiple benefits of poetry for children and the pedagogical value of the collaboration of poetry with other arts were also highlighted and supported during the scientific conference organized by the Pedagogical Department of Primary Education of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens entitled "Poetic Discourse: Inter-Artistic and Intercultural Approaches".

¹³<https://el.thpanorama.com/articles/otras-frases/55-grandes-frases-para-maestros-y-profesores.html> (30/4/2024).

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