Teaching Poetry through Dramatic Play in Greek Primary School: Surveying Teachers’ and Pupils’ Views

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Abstract

This essay explores teachers’ and pupils’ views about the importance of teaching poetry through dramatic play in Greek Primary School. A qualitative research study was conducted in 15 classrooms of some public primary schools in Greece. The research included interview and questionnaire data obtained over a one year period (2013-2014) from 15 primary teachers and 320 primary pupils in Grade 6 at the age of 11 (150 boys, 170 girls). Statistical analysis of data revealed that: (1) The majority of teachers asserted their role to the development of aesthetic appreciation among their pupils using dramatic play and educational drama (2) Most of the pupils asserted themselves with greater confidence about their understanding of poetry through the use of dramatic play. Thus, more attention should be paid to a dramatic play-based curriculum if pupils are to be helped to appreciate poetry as an artistic, aesthetic medium.

Biography

ASTERIOS TSIARAS is Associate Professor in the department of Theatrical Studies at University of Peloponnese. He has written about many different aspects of drama education and dramatic play. His publications include the Contribution of Dramatic Play to Classroom Psycosociology in Primary Education, Dramatic Play in Primary School, Drama and Theatre in Education, Dramatic Play as a Means of Self-concept Improvement in Primary School Age Children, Theatrical Education in Primary School: A Psycho-sociological Approach and the Developmental Dimension of Teaching Drama-in-education. Current research projects are focusing on the teaching of poetry through drama and the contribution drama may make in increasing the emotional intelligence of young people.
Introduction

In recent years, the Greek educational system continues to focus on a cognitive rather than an interpersonal and aesthetic dimension. Contemporary teachers have a diverse range of demands placed on them, and generally they are expected to require a whole range of skills (Boe & Gilford, 1992; Townsend & Bates, 2007). In particular, numerous questions arise with regards to expanded teacher workloads as they encompass a much wider range of responsibilities, including counselling, welfare, social work, reporting, and community liaison (Ball & Tyson, 2011; Hargreaves, 1995). As a result, teachers must negotiate tensions arising between the pressures of managerialism, instrumentalism, technical rationalism and a bureaucratic impetus within contemporary schooling structures (Hopkins, 2007; Wang, Lin, Spalding, Odell, & Klecka, 2011). As Smyth and Shacklock (1998) put it,

The role and function of education are undergoing dramatic changes in response to these economic imperatives. The notion of a liberal education is struggling for its very survival in a context of instrumentalism and technocratic rationality where the catchwords are vocationalism, skills formation, privatization, commodification, and managerialism’ (p. 19).

Many scholars point out that instrumentalism is charged with the marginalisation of aesthetic education in official school curriculum. It is also clear that aesthetic subjects are mainly emphasised at the primary education level and their relative importance decreases in higher grades (Chapman, 2011; Heard, 1999). Consequently, secondary concern is given to the holistic development of individuals within the value system of educational philosophy for economic expansion (Hennessy, Hinchion, & McNamara, 2010; Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2006). Currently, assessment, target setting and testing remain a priority of educational policy, whereas these simple processes play a crucial role in pupils’ learning (Byrne & Brodie, 2012; Miller & Yúdice, 2002). As a result, within this educational framework there are no necessary conditions for intuitive insight and subjects such as poetry become even more difficult to withstand the patterns of standardisation, evident across the elementary school curriculum (Higgins, 2009; Zajonc, 2006).

A curriculum that recognizes the central importance of emotion, body, and spirit as well as the mind is of vital importance. For this reason, many scholars recognize the transformative power of poetry as a means of cultural elevation, emphasising that schools have the responsibility to lead children to an appreciation of those works of literature that have been widely regarded as amongst the finest in the language (Goodwyn, 1992; Powell, 1999). These scholars argue for an aesthetic approach to the teaching of aesthetic subjects such as poetry where the personal development supersedes the mere transmission of knowledge (Pike, 2004; Powell, 1999). Poetry is the form of writing that can help to bridge a body-mind dualism and undoubtedly mould child’s life soul and the character. It tends to beget a love of beauty and of truth in alliance; it indirectly suggests high and noble principles of action, and it encourages people to regard emotion as a functional whole so helpful in making principles operative (Benton, 1984).

Over the past decades, there has been an increasing interest by educators in understanding the positive impact of dramatic play on children’s overall development. Many scholars regard dramatic play as a playful activity and as a means of inspiring children to develop symbolic, artistic and innovative behaviours (Jennings & Gerhardt, 2011; Moyles, 2010). The importance of incorporating both the subjective and objective, the cognitive and affective and the emotional and intellectual simultaneously within the
framework of teaching poetry through dramatic play becomes evident (Horsman, 2000). The term dramatic play is generally used to describe all kinds of pretend play, that is, symbolic play, role-play, imaginative play, fantasy play, make-believe play, and socio-dramatic play (Miller, 2010; Torgerson, 2001). This kind of play appears in the form of artistic behaviour between symbolic play and dramatic art (Casey, 2010; Koster, 2014). Dramatic play is a child-oriented activity and includes the following elements: imitative role play, make-believe with regard to objects, make-believe in regard to actions and situations, interpersonal interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication and narratives (Ciussi & Gebers Freitas, 2012; McCullough, 2000).

Children’s participation in dramatic play signifies symbolic transformation and personal imagination in real or imaginary situations (Crouch, 2009; Lobman & O’Neill, 2011). The children use their internal symbolic abilities giving shape to their shared experience through the transformation process serving the general function of maintaining social contact (Minks, 2013; Nwokah, 2010). Participants in dramatic play maintain two types of shape in their improvisations. On the one hand, they represent their vision in the form of symbols and images which are directly related to their personal experiences of cultural identities, roles, social events, language varieties and different ways of representing an action (Mayesky, 2012; McGuinn, 2014). On the other hand, children uncover what they have internalized in relation to dramatic play (Luongo-Orlando, 2010; Woodard & Milch, 2012).

Dramatic play provides excellent opportunities for fine-tuning the roles which children play. It helps them to acknowledge and demonstrate their competence and provides a safe setting for exploring and practicing new and more satisfying ways for them to play their current roles (Koster, 2014; Sternberg & Garcia, 2000). Aside from being lots of fun, taking on fantasy roles helps children to spark their spontaneity and creativity (Newman & Newman, 2011; Saracho, 2012). Dramatic play gives them a time out from their daily concerns and a chance to deal with them in a figurative way. It also provides a culture medium for children to learn how to be group members and to learn how to express their individuality (Grainger, 2003).

The majority of research studies which have focused on benefits of dramatic play for disabled children and preschool-age children were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, when enthusiasm for play as a research topic was at its peak (Power, 2000). Some of the above studies deal with the significance of the participants’ personality in the form of acting out behaviours in dramatic play and some focus on the importance of dramatic play in supporting children’s cognitive, social and affective development (Fein, 1989; Lieberman, 1977; McCullough, 2000). Some other studies focus on the effect of dramatic play on the participants’ literacy and narrative abilities and others investigate the evolutionary stages of symbolic play in relation to the child’s age (Blake, 2007; McCune-Nicolish, 1981; Piaget, 1962). Moreover, some studies evaluate the content of the dramatic activities and the impact that these exert on the development of children’s social skills (Lindon, 2001; Yassa, 1997). Finally, some surveys have sought to shed light on the psychotherapeutic effect of dramatic play on primary children (Curry, 1974; Fineman, 1962; Marks-Tarlow, 2012).

Most of the above studies have been derived from relatively small-scale, cross-sectional studies. Therefore, the challenge to researchers is to mount more extensive and practice-oriented studies to investigate the various uses of dramatic play in diverse primary school settings. The limited research evidence suggests that educators should resist policies that reduce time for dramatic play experiences in primary school and try to increase funding for research on relationships between dramatic play and holistic child development (Baldwin, 2008; Wilson, 2012).
Methodology

The goal of this research is to investigate primary school teachers’ views of teaching poetry through dramatic play and to evaluate pupils’ responses in such an approach to teaching poetry. This research uses the combined theoretical framework of positivist and interpretative educational research paradigms (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). In doing so, this study takes a ‘pragmatic research approach’. As it explores interpretations, it is also very similar to the phenomenological way of thinking aiming to identify and describe the subjective experience of respondents (Schwandt, 2001). The study comprised two main phases. Phase one was quantitative in nature and consisted of the completion of a self-administered questionnaire by students and teachers. The questions focused on the teachers’ and pupils’ perceptions towards teaching poetry through dramatic play.

The teacher questionnaire included the following questions:
1. What is your purpose in the teaching of poetry in the primary school?
2. You could ask pupils to illustrate poems through an alternative way of creative art expression: A. Always; B. Sometimes; C. Never
3. You could encourage pupils to write their own poems by using dramatic techniques: A. Always; B. Sometimes; C. Never

The pupil questionnaire consisted of the following questions:
1. Could you list the most frequently occurring pedagogical activities in the teaching of poetry in your class?
2. Do you feel confident about your understanding of poetry?
3. Which are the most effective class resources for enhancing your understanding of poetry? A. Dramatic play; B. The teacher’s notes; C. Poetry textbook

The questionnaire was disseminated in 15 primary school classrooms, of grade six, by the researcher. Since any research needs to adhere to the relevant ethical principles, students and teachers were asked to provide pseudonyms so as to protect their identities and maintain privacy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Statistical analysis was performed by the use of a concrete methodology, reading each response to open-ended questions and organizing data into categories based on emerging themes. Each category was codified and simple descriptive analysis was used to analyses the data and to provide an account of the practices and embraced views of the teachers, and pupils, involved. The main purpose at this stage of the research process was to present preliminary findings on a number of central research questions. This data served to highlight the principal areas of interest and relevance for phase two.

Information of a more qualitative nature, gathered through phase two, included detailed interviews that were of a semi-structured nature in order to enable data gathering related to specific beliefs and issues of particular significance to teachers. The purpose of this phase was to conduct an in-depth inquiry into the issues emergent from phase one. Phase two data were transcribed, analysed and interpreted, via thematic content analysis, for emergent themes reflective of participants’ visions of poetry teaching in primary education (Kvale, 2009; Seidman, 2006).

Research findings

320 pupils and 15 teachers from 15 primary schools took part in phase one of the research. Table 1 illustrates the gender distribution of the research cohort.
The involved educators in the reflective development through action research were not limited to a singular point of view or role. Figure 1 displays teachers’ responses to three survey questions regarding various issues for the teaching of poetry. Eighty percent of primary-school teachers asserted their role to the development of aesthetic appreciation among their pupils, by stressing that their purpose was to help pupils appreciate poetry as an artistic, aesthetic medium to which they can relate perfectly. They also affirmed that their prime aim was to sensitize pupils to the pleasure of appreciating a high literary genre, by helping them better understand themes, structure and imagery. Teachers said that what they wanted for themselves was to foster a passionate form of engagement with poetry and to cultivate a lifelong love of poetry to their pupils. In addition, twenty percent of primary teachers felt their purpose was to explain poems to their class and to help prepare pupils by supplying various notes and questions on selected poems. However, these teachers reported that this technical focus had a subversive effect on the fulfilment of their primary target in the aesthetic appreciation of poetry.

Table 1: Sample Size and Composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Q1: What is your purpose in the teaching of poetry in the primary school?

Q2: You could ask pupils to illustrate poems through an alternative way of creative art expression: A. Always; B. Sometimes; C. Never

Q3: You could encourage pupils to write their own poems by using dramatic techniques: A. Always; B. Sometimes; C. Never

Teachers were more likely to ask pupils to illustrate poems through an alternative way of creative art with a high percentage of answering ‘always’ (92%), and a much lower ‘sometimes’ (5%) or never (3%) using these instructional strategies. Eighty-five per cent of the teachers interviewed answered that they ‘always’ use dramatic play and
educational drama for the teaching of poetry, ten percent ‘sometimes’ and five percent ‘never’. It is common sense that a drama-based instructional method provides a highly accessible medium through which children will be able to grow emotionally (Wright, 2006). All the teachers, through semi-structured interviews, made positive comments about the value of dramatic play as a means of teaching poetry in primary education. The composition of a poem is also noted as a vital necessity for pupils. Within the class, composition provides rich terrain for pupils’ affective development who may write poems through dramatic conventions as a daily diary or various forms of writing in role (Madden, 2009; Vodickova, 2009). Seventy-seven percent of teachers surveyed answered ‘always’, fifteen percent ‘sometimes’ and eight percent ‘never’ encouraging their pupils to write their own poems with the use of dramatic techniques.

Exploring poetry gives pupils the chance to develop higher levels of self-awareness on their own responses, emotional, imaginative, and intellectual to aesthetic texts on the ultimate goal of fostering an aesthetic pedagogy in the classroom (Cockett & Fox, 1999). In order to realize this ambition of teaching poetry teachers need to focus on the pupil’s personal response to a poem. To this end, pupils were asked to list the most frequently occurring pedagogical activities in their class. Figure 2 displays pupils’ responses to three survey questions regarding various issues for the teaching of poetry. Most of them (70%) wrote about poetry positive experiences with drama, music and painting in school. Some of the pupils (30%), however, mentioned negative experiences in memorizing and reciting poetry in front of the class, as well as trying to figure out the teacher’s interpretation.

| Q1: Could you list the most frequently occurring pedagogical activities in the teaching of poetry in your class?
| Q2: Do you feel confident about your understanding of poetry?
| Q3: Which are the most effective class resources for enhancing your understanding of poetry? A. Dramatic play; B. The teacher’s notes; C. Poetry textbook

Pupils stressed that they felt frustrated towards what they realized as the equivocal nature of poetry, with 60% of them assuring the difficulties of the correct way to understand the multiple meanings of a poem. It was evident, too, a modest sense of dependency on the part of both teacher and pupil for pre-scripted responses to
Discussion

In qualitative research reliability refers to the extent to which findings from a study can be replicated. As Merriam (2002) put it, ‘Reliability is problematic in the social sciences simply because human behavior is never static, nor is what many experience necessarily more reliable than what one person experiences’ (p. 221). As the current study is qualitative in nature, the findings are inevitably specific to the particular time and place and they cannot be applied to a wider population or to different contexts (Yin, 2003). Moreover, despite being impossible to produce generalizable results, this qualitative study achieved to obtain in-depth knowledge about teachers’ experience of teaching poetry through dramatic play. Consequently, we hope and expect that readers can learn from these cases and perhaps transfer some of the knowledge gained to their own situations, their own practice.

The aim of the research was to investigate six grade teachers’ views and perceptions of their role in developing an aesthetic appreciation of poetry by encouraging engagement, interest, enjoyment and inspiring a love of poetry into their pupils with the use of dramatic play. There were some teachers who appeared more concerned about the standardised approach to poetry analysis in which the lowest level of aesthetic development appears to be well situated rather than a sincere reflection on the poem’s overall aesthetic unity. In this case, pupils deal with the literal meaning of the verse and the technical analysis of form, rhyme-scheme, mood, tone, etc. However, there were a lot of teachers who attempted to develop pupils’ emotional and subjective sensibilities. Thus, they have succeeded, through dramatic play, in providing space for a more aesthetic approach to the teaching of poetry.

The use of dramatic play, as reported above by pupils, evidences its significance as a teaching strategy in expedient access to the meaning of the poem. Moreover, some pupils reported a need for teacher’s notes and poetry textbook in which meaning is transparent and clearly defined. It is widely recognised that enthusiastic teaching based on a wide range of teaching and learning strategies is the key to keeping students engaged in poetry lessons (Paulsen & Feldman, 1999). If students only read poetry, their approach to it is often superficial and they might not adequately notice important aspects that are hidden between the lines (Vodickova, 2009). Pupils need to experiment with non-verbal communicative aspects of language (body language, gestures, and facial expressions), as well as verbal aspects (intonation, rhythm, stress, slang, and idiomatic expressions), when analysing and interpreting poetry. Dramatic play holds the potential to enhance pupils’ subjective understanding and leads to an active exploration of the emotional and imaginative aspects of the poem (Neelands, 1999; Taylor, 1994). Dramatic play is essentially improvised in nature. Drawing on the elements of drama, it enables students to create and inhabit a fictional world for the experiences, insights, emotions and understandings (Machado, 2010; Wilson, 2012). Besides, it encourages pupils to bring their interests and personalities, their ‘cultural capital’, to the learning process so that they can become actively involved and personalise their knowledge (Luongo-Orlando, 2010; Nwokah, 2010).
Conclusions

The present research stresses the need to support teachers in their attempts to foster enhanced potential for the affective development of pupils through dramatic play. This study also acknowledges the notable challenges and obstacles that primary school teachers encounter in the teaching of poetry. Moreover, it underlines the existence of an aesthetic consciousness for poetry pedagogy amongst Greek primary teachers which encourages dignified levels of pupils’ intellectual and emotional engagement.

It should be noted that there are concrete dangers to teaching the arts, especially in disciplines such as poetry which seek to cultivate aesthetic experience (Cockett & Fox, 1999; Pike, 2004). The importance of encouraging honest subjective engagement in multiple meanings, therefore, remains a central concern in teaching poetry through dramatic play (Espinosa & Moore, 2000). Many authors acknowledge the necessity for the coordination of subjectivity and objectivity both of which should be treated as mutually beneficial rather than mutually exclusive (Berthoff, 1990; Stevens, 2007). Effective engagement with a poem in the classroom should recognize that both constant emotional characteristics and analytical features have a significant impact on a pupil’s response to poetry (Vodickova, 2009; Whelan, 2008). Different authors have focused on matters of socially constructed knowledge and, therefore, the benefits of sustained uncertainty and reflective inquiry in the present process of teaching poetry need to be acknowledged (Britzman, 2003; Zajonc, 2006).

A large part of self-understanding is the search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of people’s lives. Poetry is a form of writing that relies deeply on metaphor to convey meaning accurately and it has the transformational power to feed the heart and senses (Rummel, 1995; Steinbergh, 1999). Providing positive experiences with poetry for the pupils can be a means for them to realize a conceptual metaphor experientially by making personal connections to a poem’s meaning and aesthetically through fresh expressions of imaginative rationality. When pupils read and hear poetic metaphors, they have models to discover and create their own personally meaningful metaphors since poetic imagery not only invites sensual responses, but also evokes emotions and connections to personal experiences (Graves, 1992; Heard, 1999). In this way, pupils can easily draw upon this knowledge as they develop individual subjectivity, personality and consciousness (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Nodelman & Reimer, 2003). One of the advantages of dramatising a poem is that the entire class can take part in the activity, a fact which offers primary school children an effective way to imagine the world through personal insight, to organize and interpret their life experience, and to establish meaningful connections to other areas of knowledge (Cronmiller, 2007).

It is a common belief that when a teacher values poetry, pupils sense that and may be motivated to develop a life-long interest in reading poetry and possibly in writing their own poems (McClure, Harrison & Reed, 1990). A teacher who does not fully enjoy poetic imagery will not be able to convey this pleasure to his or her pupils. Poetry’s figurative language can help pupils experience ideas, images and feelings in a concentrated form, encouraging abstract thought and heightened powers of observation (Hopkins, 2007; Rich, 1993). What is essential, in this regard, is that primary school teachers need to get out of the traditional word-by-word focus on meaning, verbal inflection and figure of speech. Their role is not to impose authoritative interpretations but to develop individual responses, to be non-prescriptive, non-didactic. They should alternatively view the continuity of the poem as a whole, as though it were an oil painting. Primary school teachers themselves, in general, need to help pupils enjoy poetry’s metaphors, sounds and images through dramatic play (Dymoke, Lambirth & Wilson, 2013).

In conclusion, teachers need to put forth the necessary effort required to promote
pupils’ affective and aesthetic sensitivity while they try to find ways to streamline their work in a context of standardisation and uniformity (Hanratty, 2008). It is also the responsibility of education faculties preparing future teachers to provide them with methods that will enrich and enliven their teaching. Teachers often steer clear of poetry fearing negative reactions because they are not confident about their ability to stimulate and encourage pupils on the pleasures of dramatizing, reading and writing poetry. The process of introducing poetry into the classroom can be fun, if this is done through movement, dramatic play and art. Enactment, enthusiasm and engagement with pupils, so as to enhance their self-concepts, allow teachers and pupils to overcome seemingly insuperable difficulties. Part of what poetry gives children is human connection and fresh ways of interpreting and translating images and signs (Berthoff, 1990; Rummel, 1995). But even if poems don’t have the strength to change the world, what they do is that they change pupils’ understanding of what’s going on in their world and can inspire them to be better human beings (Heaney, 1991; Heard, 1993).

References


