

RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY

and children's books



INTRODUCTION



Within the framework of the celebrations for the Universal Children's Day, a series of workshops was held by the NGOs:

- CENTRE FOR ARTISTIC AND PEDAGOGICAL TRAINING "Schedia"
 - THE SOCIETY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT AND CREATIVE OCCUPATION OF CHILDREN (EADAP) and
 - THE NETWORK FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS;
- the workshops were also attended by educators.

The aim of the event was to pinpoint the role of children's books in the fight against discrimination.

The results of the workshops were presented during a one-day meeting held on Monday, 10th December 2007, at the Greek General Confederation of Labour (GSEE) conference room, and were commented upon by the audience, as well as a team of experts.

The panel, coordinated by publisher Aphrodite Dimou, consisted of Giorgos Moschos, of the **Children's Rights Ombudsman Department**, and:

Dr Helen Agathonos, *Psychologist*

Dr Vasso Vassilou-Papageorgiou, *Educational Sciences / Publisher Anastasia Vafea, Director of "Schedia"*

Dr Mirsini Zorba, *Political Sciences / Former member of the European Parliament / Former Director of the National Book Centre of Greece (EKEBI)*

Vangelis Iliopoulos, *Author*

Leda Stergiou, *Lecturer, Department of Infant Education of the University of Ioannina*

Eugenia Fakinou, *Author*



The conclusions of the workshops were presented by Natassa Papaprokopiou and Anna Alifrangis, on behalf of EADAP, and Eleni Karagiorgi and Panayiotis Kassianos on behalf of "Schedia".

This publication, funded by the "**Bernard van Leer Foundation**", presents the conclusions of the project, aiming at the sensitization of parents, educators, publishers, authors and the mass media to select, create and publish children's books that respect all children's right to diversity.

Message from Giorgos Moschos, Children's Rights Ombudsman

«The Children's Rights Ombudsman very much believes in children's books, especially when they can operate as an incentive and an opportunity for children to think, be educated and activated in search of the truth, and to be able to put themselves in someone else's place. Through books, children can learn more about defending their rights, as well as respecting and supporting the rights of others. We hope that children's books contribute to the increase of young children's rights ombudsmen in our society».



RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY, THE RIGHT OF ALL CHILDREN



The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a very important agreement among governments of almost every country in the world. In the Convention, 41 different rights of children and teenagers up to the age of 18 are stated.

Some of the most important ones are:

- The right of every child to grow up in a state of equality, free of discrimination of any kind, irrespective of "race, colour, sex, language, religion, or the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status" (article 2).
- The obligation of children's education to be directed to the development of respect for human rights and the preparation of the child for responsible life, in the spirit of equality and friendship among all social groups (article 29).

The full copy of these two important articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child has as follows:

Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

1. States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.





2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members.

Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:

- (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
- (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
- (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
- (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
- (e) The development of respect for the natural environment.

2. No part of the present article or article 28 shall be construed so as to interfere with the liberty of individuals and bodies to establish and direct educational institutions, subject always to the observance of the principle set forth in paragraph 1 of the present article and to the requirements that the education given in such institutions shall conform to such minimum standards as may be laid down by the State.



CREATIVE CO-EXISTENCE WITHOUT DISCRIMINATIONS – A BET THAT WE HAVE TO WIN FOR THE CHILDREN



Following similar developments in an international environment, we in Greece also experience a growing heterogeneity of our social structures.

«It is estimated that during the period 2004-2005, the number of foreign and "repatriated" students in secondary schools reached a total of 10,6% of the students' population. 122 different nationalities represented in the Greek school system were recorded.

As the European Council states, multiculturalism is a universal phenomenon, with a definite tendency towards expansion. So the bet that we have to win is to achieve a substantial and creative coexistence with these "others". A coexistence that would prove to be in the best interest of both those investing their new life in our country, and of the accommodating country that's investing in them.» *Leda Stergiou*

However, our societies have a hard time avoiding inequality and discrimination. Discrimination causes a never-ending circle of social and economic exclusion, degrading the children's ability to develop capitalizing on their potential. We therefore have to make an effort to eliminate discrimination against children, whatever its cause may be.



CHILDREN'S BOOKS: A POWERFUL TOOL AGAINST DISCRIMINATION



Despite the increase of new media, reading children's books is still an essential activity as far as Greek children's upbringing, education and entertainment is concerned. During the last five years, the annual number of published children's books has remained invariable, making up approximately 1/4 of the total annual books production, while 46% of all children's books are preschool books (source: EKEBI).

Books and education are an important means of fighting against discrimination. Dr Vasso Vassilou-Papageorgiou, publisher and educator, explained how this works.

«A book is a very powerful tool that helps children understand their immediate environment (family, society and the world).

Long before the child acquires the ability to read, parents, babysitters and teachers read to them stories of people of the distant past up to the present day, of people living the same way as the child and the people around him/her do. Impressions and messages in these stories often stay with them throughout their lives.

Reading children's books is an activity increasingly suggested to younger ages. They are a mirror for the child to see himself/herself in, but also a window, through which he/she can interpret the world around him/her.



Thus, a notion can get through that people from different groups can play and work together, cooperate and solve their problems, as they may be different, but they have similar feelings, needs, values and ambitions. Love and hate, fear and desire for justice don't just concern a few people, but all men equally, regardless of their differences.

An illustrated children's book is a tool for development, school preparation, access to culture, and support of socialization. Privately –outside of school– reading is the most common way of interacting between parents and children».

Ms Anastasia Vafea outlines:

«Books are very important tools for small children to learn to respect the "other". And this is acquired by:

- introducing various equal characters
- not avoiding reference to real life conflict situations
- encouraging young readers to take initiative for overthrowing stereotypes and rejecting discrimination and prejudice
- presenting variety as an element of enrichment of the society, and not as a problem».



CHILDREN'S BOOKS: A CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATORS



«**E**ducators remain regulators and mediators of subjects and attitudes presented in books. That means that an educator has the power to even subvert prejudice or stereotypes that a book may project, using appropriate pedagogic methods and activities". *Eleni Karagiorgi*

Panayiotis Kassianos goes further to say:

«When we talk about children's books and respect for diversity, we have to differentiate between two aspects of children's books and books in general:

1. I read a book by myself
2. We read a book at school

In the first case, the child reads during his/her leisure hours, either by himself/herself or with the help of an adult, for entertainment and pleasure.

In the second case, reading is an organized activity, which:

- Has to maintain the characteristics of the first case, (entertainment and pleasure), so that it's not burdened with any elements of didacticism
- Is still, however, a pedagogic tool in the hands of the educator, helping him/her organize activities which will render the subjects of the book more clear, and manage views, attitudes or stereotypes that it conveys».





Leda Stergiou suggests to educators:

- The first thing that an educator has to know is that there can be no honest respect if it's not originally based on the acknowledgment of the other's existence, the acknowledgment of the elements that compose the other's identity. Man always feels the need to defend, protect and reinforce his identity, both personal and social.
- Students must be guided to comprehend and explore the differences among people. In doing so, the aim is not to focus on the incompatibility of civilizations, but to work on accepting and respecting difference, praising universal values.
- A danger that often occurs with the children of low status emigrants is the so-called double semilingualism, which is the deficient knowledge of both the native and second language. It's the case when students are incapable of meeting educational demands, and end up failing at school.
- Creating small makeshift dictionaries of basic every day words, with the help of foreign children and their parents, doesn't take special skills. But it does take zest. Zest to draw children out of obscurity, to urge them to feel proud (firstly of the fact that they exist, and secondly of already knowing one language and learning or having learned another one). It takes zest to bring all students in contact with multilingualism, which is officially supported, but never implemented.
- It's obvious that the more the places of origin and life stories of students vary, the more their experiences diversify. That is exactly the kind of diversity that needs to be brought out, both through the pedagogic methods and attitudes of educators, and through educational tools, an important part of which are children's books.



LET US CHOOSE CHILDREN'S BOOKS HAVING THE CHILDREN'S FUTURE AND RESPECT FOR THEIR RIGHTS AS CRITERIA



According to Dr Vasso Vassilou-Papageorgiou:

«Writings and readers are moulded through culture and society. As vehicles of cultural values, children's books also deal with diversity, which can be national, racial, linguistic, economic or sex oriented. Consequently, we have to choose children's books based on the cultural aspects of their texts.

Not all children's books include the messages we want to get through to children nowadays. They often include the same stereotypical views that are conveyed by the rest of the media.

Intentionally or unintentionally, overtly expressed or insinuated, values are built into every story and illustration. It's a matter that doesn't only have to do with short story books and narratives, but also with learning and activity books. Even the most innocent little story may include powerful stereotypical perceptions, promoting discrimination and showing no respect for diversity.

Children mainly focus their interest on the story, initially failing to detect the values presented in the story they are reading or are being read to. When small children are repeatedly exposed to stereotypical concepts through words and images, there's always the risk of such distortions becoming part of their thinking, especially if it's reinforced by social prejudice.



It therefore becomes the adults' responsibility to select the kind of literature that is appropriate for children, which will give them an idea of what people's relationships are like today worldwide. There should be more books depicting socially excluded or deviant (in terms of skin colour, abilities etc.) groups. Contemporary multicultural societies demand that children read stories that acquaint them with diversity and overturn stereotypes regarding roles and values, directly or indirectly: books that project minority cultures, alternative family formations, equality between the sexes, people with special needs. Those are the books that we need!»

Children's books author Vangelis Iliopoulos emphasized:

«Respect for rights begins by respecting our neighbour, our friend, our schoolmate. Children's literature quickly perceives the signs of our times and presents children with books that include subjects that interest them, and stories with characters, in which the children will discover themselves. All that remains is for the child – reader to assign the meaning that he/she wishes to the text, and for the educator to discover -out of a wide range that's offered in the market- the kind of books that will touch children's souls».



LET US CREATE MORE BOOKS THAT RESPECT THE CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO DIVERSITY



Dr Vasso Vassilou-Papageorgiou refers to the role of the author:

«Before a book becomes readable, it's in the mind and imagination of its author. Then, after it's written, it's materialized and illustrated, sending out a message through its cover. It is shaped, published and becomes a commercial object. Afterwards, it spreads out to children's catalogues, publishing houses websites, libraries and bookstores. That means that there is a whole line of different people with different goals, who shape up the product we call a book, before it reaches children's hands. Making sure that these books are created without stereotypical ideas, but with respect to diversity, is a full time job for every part of that line.

Of course, although the author may have every intention to do so, the illustrator might fail him/her. Or perhaps the text and illustration will serve the goals of the author, but the book is failed by the publisher and the way it's promoted. The meaning and values of the book could even be failed by the mediator – teachers, parents or inspirers».





In an effort to sum up the characteristics that children's books should have in order to promote respect for diversity, Leda Stergiou reports the following:

- They shouldn't reproduce stereotypical images (regarding the two opposite sexes, the roles set in the family and school, or certain social groups).
- Their subjects and process thereof shouldn't be limited; on the contrary, they should project and promote variety.
- Regarding the role of the sexes. Sex discrimination is communicated to children at a very early age, when we show them that boys and girls play different games, prefer different colors, have different obligations and are capable of different things. Also, when we teach them that mom and dad's roles are clearly divided, and that there are things that are just for women, and others that are just for men.
- Regarding national and cultural origin of the characters. A variety of origins, relative to what is now the case in our country, should be represented. Another thing that's important is that the "different one" shouldn't be one among many, or be heroic in order to assert respect. Every day life and reality in all its variety is always a trustworthy guide.
- Regarding professions and occupations. A wide range of professions should be presented in children's books (construction workers, cleaning ladies, teachers, doctors etc), and reference should be made to child labor.



- Regarding different cultures. We need books that describe various cultural elements, both as they are expressed in the countries of origin, and as they are modified in host countries. For example, how does an Albanian family function? Which values are promoted in Albanian schools? Which games, celebrations and habits do we know in our neighbor country, and how do they adopt to Greek reality?
- Multilingualism should also be promoted through children's books. Bilingual fairy tales are useful, but the use of foreign words and expressions here and there also reflects and justifies the present linguistic variety.
- Different physical abilities finally need to be presented in books. Getting to know characters that are different as far as physical characteristics and skills are concerned, but with whom they have so many common interests and concerns, helps children deal with any fear or disbelief they might have for what's different.

If we just think of how many children could benefit from one conscious and active educator, author, parent, publisher or even a common civilian, then we will realize how any effort for a creative coexistence is anything but hopeless.



CONCLUSIONS



Changes in Greek social structures occurred too fast during the last 20 years, a fact that resulted to a delayed response of traditional media, publishers, educators and families to the need of adopting new values, such as social integration and respect to diversity.

That is the reason that children's books are not yet satisfactorily free of prejudice. Consequently, whereas children, today more than ever, need to develop the understanding and abilities required to evolve inside societies that keep changing, becoming more and more complicated, our educating and learning system does not yet play the leading role that it should.

Dr Mirsini Zorba summarized:

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Children's books sustained radical changes in our country, in terms of form and content, right after the political change-over in 1974.

The importance of children's books, a genre that was rather underestimated up until then, was finally appreciated through the diffusion of new pedagogic methods, which were in the centre of educators' discussions at the time, as well as through the function of alternative schools.

Up until then, texts and illustration only met the children's basic needs for information, entertainment, and a wider range of learning.

Older popular editions of classical texts were reprinted with no particular care, while preschool books were terribly insufficient. Thanks to Greek writers and illustrators, who worked for children's books with imagination and creativity, free from didacticism, successful publishing lines were gradually created.





That made children's books resistant to new media competition and reinforced their position inside the family and the educational procedure. At present, it's time to evaluate the progress of children's books in our country and pinpoint any new needs they have to meet. Among these needs, the necessity for recognition, awareness, dialogue and positive attitude towards otherness is of the utmost importance.

The Other, the one that's different from us, scares us and causes a negative reaction on our part. It's easy to characterize him as an enemy and hate him, as inferior and underestimate him, or as weird and laugh at him.

It's hard however to look at him without any prejudice, to sympathize with him and treat him as equal, to read into the differences and start a dialogue, to find ways of communicating with him and jointly earn confidence, trust, solidarity, positive energy and wider cultural ground.

Nowadays, children's books have to meet the demands of these extremely complicated social and interpersonal procedures.

This is not an easy task, given that the otherness is often considered inferior by nature. That is a completely false allegation since, as we now know, otherness is a social construction that doesn't just grow in nature like a flower.

And yet, it often happens that, while we are sensitive to some kinds of discrimination, we consider some other kinds "natural".

This is exactly where that powerful community, consisting of writers and illustrators, educators and parents, professors and publishers, critics, NGOs and journalists comes in; their role is to shed light on discrimination of all sorts, to rid it from the sense of normality that covers and falsifies it, and to offer us children's books that will reveal an attractive world, better than the one we live in.

A world where inequality and discrimination will be considered unnatural and Children's Rights and Otherness only natural.



HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE WORKSHOPS





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