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The term "multicultural children's literature" is relatively new in the field of cultural and intercultural studies. As such, during the process of transformation and expansion of its meaning, it is susceptible to different definitions in view of each approach. A brief and general definition of the term, though, describes books for children which treat issues of cultural diversity, either racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious, or even biological and social and aim at contributing to the development of the intercultural awareness of young readers. The term was apparently conceived because of the student's need to define this material of examination or because of the publishing houses' need to incorporate the related recent publication series for children. The need to make multicultural children's literature is expressed by the foundation in the mid 60's of the Council on Interracial Books for Children, whose goal is "to promote a literature for children that better reflects the realities of a multi-cultural society" and "to affect basic change in books and media".

There is a special interest in what Mingshui Cai points out (2002: 11-15), who, starting from the premise that "every book demonstrates the complexity of multiculturalism" remarks that "we should not have a separate category of literature called multicultural literature". He believes that "the view that all literature is multicultural and should be read multiculturally opens new channels for multicultural education".

Contemporary short stories and otherness

However, the image of the stranger, the different, the "other" has always concerned literature in general; it has fascinated readers, because what is different is always attractive, as it satisfies people's curiosity and the need for knowledge.

Having clearly different expediencies and functions than literature addressed to adults, there has been during the last decades a large production of books for children, whose main topic is the otherness/the identity, that tries to satisfy the need for education in intercultural awareness within the new, more and more pluralistic and multicultural environments. This happens because the terms intercultural education and intercultural awareness, at least in the field of education, have a specific gravity. On the other hand, despite the discussions among academics, educators and publishers, intercultural awareness, has not yet found ways to be expressed in modern pluralistic societies. Having all these as starting-point for our discussion, the ideological content of these texts, as well as their effectiveness to formulate antiracist messages has been explored during an undergraduate course in the

School of Primary Education of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Contemporary editions of illustrated books for young children, written originally or translated into Greek, treating issues of diversity in general were collected and studied. The narrative persons of these books were sometimes humanized animals, objects or imaginary entities, while every "other" was mainly defined by some exterior feature, differentiated with regard to the dominant group in terms of shape, color, size or some other characteristic that the "other" did or did not have. Although it would be worth commenting on each and every text for its peculiar notional nuances, a point of strong discussion was the presence of specific narrative techniques, schemas and motives in most of the books. As a consequence, repetition of constants has revealed some interesting stable ideological lines. By examining the way literature for children handles, treats and "embraces" the idea of the different, it is easily ascertained that the plot in the majority of the books is built and based on the following narrative schema: emergence of the diversity (individual) – refusal for its acceptance by the identity (collective) – testing of the diversity /offer to the identity – acceptance/recognition of the value and the necessity of the diversity. The "other" appears at first as a problem to be resolved, causes a certain trouble or vexation to the dominant group when entering its environment; in order that the initial hostility and distrust are reversed, the testing motive is necessary. Finally the "other" needs to prove that he has moral fortification and that he is capable of contributing to the culturally and ideologically dominant group so as to be judged as equal and to be accepted by the group. Furthermore, the "other" is enveloped in stereotypical symbolisms which are enforced by the illustrations, while his origins or his previous condition is usually not mentioned and he does not have a "voice". His story is told by a third person, an omniscient narrator who speaks for the "other" but without being the "other". In very few cases the "other" undertakes to articulate a dynamic speech and give his point of view. The following paradox takes place: even if narration comes out for the irreproachable and capable, yet unfortunate and marginalized "other", it undermines in the end the anti-racist ideology it meant to defend in the beginning. So, although these texts' clear intention and ideology is to defend the acceptance of the "other", of his right to be different and of the appointment of the beauty and the richness of this difference (this is why the initial racist attitude of the dominant group is completely reversed in the end), there are many textual sings that intend to state the opposite. The "other's" literary figure seems to serve the needs to build a solid literary world, but also the need of dominant group's members for self-determination. The stereotypical and not detailed description of the persons of the narration, the predictable plot, the dominant group's "voice" and the explicitly formulated message/moral in the end, render the subject's approach superficial and schematic. On the one hand they dam up relevant discussions but on the other they reproduce stereotypical concepts and prejudices that pollute the intercultural effectiveness of these texts.

One of the issues that preoccupied the research was the "voice"/the opinion expressed by the narration; this is because it is the "voice" of the dominant group, as these books are created by the western cultural system in order to be consumed within its borders. So, no matter how much the narration's voice tries to lead to empathy, the effective process of sharing "an emotional response with another as well as the ability to discriminate the other's perspective and role" (Feshbach 1975), it is finally captured in its own vision of the

world, it bears inevitably its codes, its sounds, it reproduces, unconsciously, familiar stereotypical views. This is because the literary construction of the "other" is attempted based on granted information coming from the outer world but then transmitted to this one. The narrative thought and as a consequence the voice talking about diversity, is structured and organized, sometimes more sometimes less, by the social representations, which it regenerates and reproduces. It is possible that the narrative thought disagrees with some stereotypical symbolisms and prejudices and tries to reverse the established ideas. This assumption, no matter how attractive, amusing or even necessary it seems, often meets with the argument of "the attraction that the stereotype exerts on the writer" (Abatzopoulou, 1998: 162).

These books' purpose is to promote the ideology of accepting the other, of recognizing his right to be different, of appreciating the value and the richness of every different culture. It is not the assimilation of the "other" by the dominant team that we aim at, but his acceptance and his incorporation in the team. However, the terms "incorporation" and "assimilation", despite the fact that they describe two totally different procedures and situations and, as a consequence, two different and also conflicting ideologies, they are not always mentioned with their exact notional content. As a result, cultural convergence is suggested and cultural diversity is underestimated.

There is also a significant number of books that opt for commenting diversity by adopting a different approach and different narrative techniques. In these cases, diversity constitutes an advantage from the very beginning. The "other" has a positive self-concept as to his diversity. He wants to reveal and project it, but even then diversity becomes a target, it is marked by the idea of being different. As a result, a one-track way of thinking, a one-track, schematic and simplified image of the comprehensive, complex and multicultural reality of our days pours into the texts.

However, no one can doubt the contribution of these books in the development of the intercultural idea; because they give the chance, within a school environment, to open a discussion and raise questions, on condition that they are guided by a well informed teacher.

Folk tales and otherness

Literature and children's literature, just as other means, constitute an appropriate opportunity to get to know each other. The truth is that in order to know the "other" we have to understand him first. It is important that we understand his cultural system as well. And "to understand other cultures, we need to develop cross-cultural competence. By reading multicultural literature, we expect to learn about cultures different from our own and to change our perspectives on them" (Cai 2002:130).

Folk tales of various civilizations, far from the Eurocentric literary point of view, totally influenced by the western civilization, even though their main topic is not some issue of identity, can be said to constitute a part of authentic multicultural children's literature. This is because they have the power to enforce the critical approach of cultural specificities and of respect towards difference. As Bruner points out (1987: 81-96), those folk tales and stories, which serve as guidelines of behavior and thought in all civilizations, are not simple

moral stories that show the right from wrong. They transmit to children some truths having sociological and anthropologic dimension. They also transmit the message that some truths are common in every civilization. Despite the different cultural structures that may be registered in them, they have common collective images as to the human being. Mingshui Cai proposes that "in the classroom, we can put together texts sets about the same universal themes" (such as family or friendship) in order to "see connections between different cultures by identifying the themes shared by the stories". Cultural similarities can be considered as a means of connection with other cultures. But differences should be discussed as well. Because "besides universal themes, there are themes of racial prejudice and discrimination" on which our attention must be focused. These are the subjects it is important to talk about (Cai 2002: 126).

When students participate actively in the procedure of narration of folk tales from various, different civilizations, sometimes as narrators or as auditors, they examine and reexamine their own cultural system, their prejudices, they spot cultural models, they "think more deeply about diversity and their own relationship to the social construction of identity" (Mello 2001).

Taking into consideration all the above mentioned, narration and especially re-narration of various folk tales and experiences was adopted in the Intercultural Laboratory of the European Project Pi.n.o.k.i.o. (www.pinokioproject.eu) as a basic practice, often with the significant contribution and cooperation of parents. It is important to mention that students from various scientific fields (let us to refer Jerome Bruner indicatively) often argue in favor of the opinion that narration is therefore important both as content and as method. It is a way to give information about an event and it is also a method of thought, a vehicle of meaning making, a method of interpretation of the event, which generates knowledge and feelings. It is a unique - and intrinsic to human nature - way of thinking and arguing. The narrated stories offer opportunities for creative activities in which children will be invited to work together, to take initiatives, to develop mechanisms to resolve problems, to complete a variety of types of expression, to gain experience and manage those already existing, to understand the price of certain choices, to think about the causes of their preconceptions, to enrich finally their knowledge data bank and their knowledge of the internal and external world. Because the skill in narrative construction and narrative understanding is substantial and of decisive importance for the cohesion of a culture, and is crucial to constructing our lives and a 'place' for ourselves in the possible world we will encounter, and find an identity within the culture in which we live and grow up (Bruner 1999:40).

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