Literacy and Multiliteracies in Early Childhood Education: some Comments on the Greek Curriculum[1]

Abstract

The decline in the dominance of the written language in the field of public communication – as observed by Kress (1997) – and the increased use of visual means to convey the meaning of a text compels us to re-examine the way in which we perceive written texts and to seek different procedures for the analysis and production of written information. The information conveyed by any text is not derived exclusively from its linguistic content but also from the contribution of other semiotic resources such as the iconic, typographic or chromatic systems. It appears that the action of the language itself can be added to, complemented or even cancelled out by the action of the other modes of meaning conveyance. Nowadays, written texts are consistently becoming more multimodal; and therefore for the perception and production of written messages it is not sufficient to have a command, solely, of reading and writing as they are understood in the context of classical literacy.

The need to manage multimodal texts entails a Multiliteracies' pedagogy (Kress & Leeuwen 1996, Kress 1997, Faiclough 2000, Kress 2000, Cope & Kalantzis 2000 & 2003) which will include, parallel to the analysis of the written discourse, pragmatic, sociological and semiotic analyses, which will together build the ability to understand and manage pictures, plans, diagrams, tables etc (Kalantzis & Cope 2000) and thus, develop the skills of visual literacy. Especially, for young children, the comprehension of multimodality in written texts might be a gateway and a preferential means to "unfold" the meaning of multimodal texts.

Taking as its starting point the view that the pedagogy of Multiliteracies is an impetus for education and, especially for language teaching and learning, the paper discusses issues from the Greek Early Childhood Curriculum on literacy.

1. Introduction - Literacy vs. multiliteracies

Among researchers and educators there is no unanimity about the content of the term 'literacy'. During the 20th century, literacy has been accredited a variety of interpretations. The oldest and, even today the most common -especially among non-

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experts- definition identifies literacy with the ability to read and write. Until the '80's, literacy was mainly linked up with illiteracy (Hannon 2000:1) and the consequences that illiteracy, may bring to peoples' social and economical life.

In Greece, the term literacy was first used some ten years ago for the translation of Ong's book "Orality and Literacy: the technologizing of the word"; till then, educational approaches to overcome adults' illiteracy or functional illiteracy were called 'alphabetization'. No specific term was used for educational practices concerning the written language in schools until very recently; instead reading and writing were considered to be basic skills and topics of the educational system.

In the traditional view, literacy is considered as the capacity to encode and decode alphabetic print and is seen as a psychological and personal ability which is developed through intensive and scaled teaching. Literacy is considered to be clearly a school procedure, taught exclusively in classroom settings. Considering literacy as a school subject, the focus of the research for many years relied solely on methodological issues, meaning the search for the best method to efficiently teach reading and writing. For the traditional view, print is the only medium through which reading and writing are effectuated and language the only mode taken into consideration. Furthermore, for the traditional model of literacy, there is only one language to be taught and learned in schools, the official form of the national language. "One medium, one mode, and one language" these are the main characteristics of the traditional model to literacy. Even today for large parts of the population, literacy is considered to be an ability related only to books. Finally, according to the traditional view, literacy is considered to be an ideologically neutral procedure, apparently with no diversification regarding the learner apart from the time and energy spent in order to learn to read and write efficiently ascribing, thus, failures in literacy solely to individuals.

During the '90s, more social approaches to literacy (the sociocultural theory to language and literacy, the social constructivist approach, the New Literacies etc) deny the neutrality of literacy and call attention to the fact that learning takes place in a sociocultural environment. Sociocultural approaches emphasize the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge and provide a paradigmatic shift away from psychological theories of literacy to an understanding of literacy as social practice. As noted by Gee, Hull and Lunkshear (1996: 1-9) *'reading and writing always swim in a far richer sea than traditional approaches to literacy allow for'*. As stated by Kress, literacy is the use of language to attain social goals in specific social contexts (Kress, 1994). Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996: 1-9) relate literacy to sociocultural parameters and define literacy as the *'competent handling of texts that*

are meaningful to 'insiders' of particular sociocultural practices and discourse communities'.

Another major change in the field of literacy studies came about during the mid '90s when the researchers of the New London Group (1996) expanded the limits of literacy in order to refer to the ability of conveying meaning in different cultural, social or domain-specific contexts and the ability of using not only alphabetical but also multimodal representations (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). The decline in the domination of the field of public communication by the written language – as observed by Kress (Kress 1997) – and the increasing use of visual means to convey the meaning of a text compels us to re-examine the way in which we perceive texts. In recent years the investigation of multimodality (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996; Kress, 1997; Kress, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kalantzis & Cope, 2001; Baldry & Thibault, 2006; O' Halloran, 2004) in the many and varied analyses of texts (written, oral, visual or others) has highlighted the large number of representative modes which are composed and contracted in the meaning making process. The action of the language itself can be added to, complemented or even cancelled out by the action of the other modes of representation. In this sense, the written message is multimodal, and therefore for the understanding and production of texts it is not sufficient merely to have a command of reading and writing as they are understood in the context of traditional literacy. The need to manage multimodal texts entails a multiliteracies' pedagogy (Kress & Leeuwen 1996, Kress 1997, Faiclough 2000, Kress 2000, Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) which will include, in parallel to the analysis of the written discourse, pragmatic, sociological and semiotic analyses, which will together build the capacity to understand and manage multi modal texts. (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). For the multiliteracies' pedagogy, literacy covers a whole range of literacies, such as visual, digital, technological, print etc. and comprises many media and modes of representation, not only print nor solely language. It is not restricted in the language course but is expanded to all subjects of the curriculum. Additionally, as much new learning occurs in out-of-school settings rather than in classroom settings, literacy is not considered only as a subject taught but also as ability learned as users interact with texts in their everyday life. For multiliteracies, literacy is not a neutral ability learned in school but is shaped by ideological stances.

1.2. From the four literacy resources model to a multiliteracies 'map'

Taking as a start point that literacy is not a technical issue but rather '*a moral, political and cultural decision about the kind of literate practices that are needed to enhance peoples' agency over their life trajectories and to enhance communities'*

intellectual, cultural and semiotic resources in print/multi-mediated economies', Luke and Freebody developed **'a four literacy resources model'** for training students in becoming literate (Luke and Freebody, 1990, 1999, 2002). The four literacy resources model moves away from the psycholinguistic approaches where literacy was considered to be a matter of skill acquisition and knowledge transmission and subsequently the focus was on the quest of the right method to develop literacy, and emphasises that literacy education is about access and apprenticeship into institutions and resources, discourses and texts. Subsequently, literacy education is about building identities and cultures, communities and institutions and, ultimately is about the range of textual practices that are required in new economies and cultures.

The four literacy resources model to literacy, as it was redefined by Luke and Freebody (1999) so as to refer to practices than to roles, discerns four different reader practices: **code breaker, meaning maker, text user,** and **text analyst.** Break the code of texts means recognising and using the fundamental features of written texts including: alphabet, sounds in words, spelling, conventions and patterns of sentence structure and text. For many people, the 'decoding' of texts remains the only possible text practice. There is no reading without meaning, so participation in the meanings of text means understanding and composing meaningful written, visual and spoken texts from within the meaning systems of particular cultures, institutions, families, communities, nation-states and so forth. Readers also have to know how to use texts functionally revealing the social relations around texts; knowing about and acting on the different cultural and social functions that various texts perform both inside and outside school and knowing that these functions shape the way texts are structured, their tone, their degree of formality and their sequence of components. Finally, critically analyse and transform texts refers to understanding and acting on the knowledge that texts are not neutral, that they represent particular views and silence other points of view. Although the four literacy resources model adds two important aspects to the usual code breaking and meaning making dimensions involved in the reading and writing of a text, meaning the text analyst dimension based on critical literacy and the text user dimension based on the genre theory, nevertheless, it remains anchored to print based literacy.

Though similar to the four literacy resources model in many aspects, **'the multiliteracies map'** developed for early childhood education during the project *Children of the new millennium* (Hill, 2004) takes into consideration the multi media and multimodal everyday life of young children today. The project that lasted from 2002 to 2004, explored four to eight year old children's learning with information and communication technologies. As noted by Hill, *'emergent and early literacy is not*

simply a question of print based versus electronic or digital literacies, but a consideration of the multi modal context of multiliteracies that makes it unique and relevant to contemporary early childhood' (Hill, 2007). Although, children in early childhood education have always used many modes and media to create meaning, such as construction, drawing or illustrations, movement and sound, the newer multimodal technologies provide them with additional mediums to make meaning and to comprehend the meanings in a range of texts (Hill, 2007). Nevertheless, the new media reshape the limits of literacy and the ways a literate person can effectively functioning in the 21[st]century.

The multiliteracies map is an analytic tool for exploring four interrelated dimensions and consequently, four interrelated practices for developing multiliteracies: **the functional user, the meaning maker, the critical analyzer** and **the transformer**. Functional use involves technical knowledge about locating, code breaking and using signs and icons, selecting and operating equipment and moving between mediums: cameras, videos, computers, paper. Meaning make means understanding how different text types and technologies make meaning in the world and how they may be used for our own and others' purposes. The focus is on the purpose and the form of text to make meaning. Critical analyse refers to the understanding that there is no one universal truth and that what is told and studied is selective. It also involves critical selection of appropriate technology for a task. Finally, transforming involves using skills and knowledge in new ways, designing and producing new texts (Hill, 2004; 2007).

2. Literacy in Greek early childhood Education

The framework for literacy in Greek early childhood Education is described in the Cross Thematic Curriculum for nursery schools (2003). Additionally, the kindergarten teacher's Guide (Dafermou, 2006) gives an elaboration of the general principles of the Curriculum and provides teaching examples for all subjects of the early childhood Education program.

2.1. The Cross Thematic Curriculum

The Curriculum adopts the constructivist approach to literacy developed by Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) based on the theory of the psychogenesis of writing. Ferreiro and Teberosky adapted the piagetian ideas about the construction of knowledge to the socio-cultural ideas from which people learn in real social activities. The new curriculum adopts the idea elaborated by Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky (Ferreiro & Teberosky 1982, Ferreiro 1990) that literacy is learned by children,

gradually, through a constructive procedure. Children should be helped by teachers to construct their ideas about writing as cultural, social and symbolic system. In this frame, letters are not supposed to be taught separately; instead, children should be helped to develop an understanding of the principles of an alphabetic writing system – such as ours- by their own efforts, and to discover the relationships between the oral and the written language.

To teach reading in nursery schools, it is proposed that '*the right conditions be secured for the children to familiarize themselves in a relaxed and unpressured way with the various forms of written discourse (books, newspapers, magazines, written signs, etc.)*'. There are also frequent references to the need for variety in the kinds of texts the children are asked to observe and process. The curriculum recognizes the need to point out the relations between image and text and their interaction in generating the meaning of the written message; it also emphasizes the need to develop the children's abilities to make assumptions concerning the content of a text. The Curriculum permits, indeed requires, the use of everyday, authentic texts to introduce the kindergartners to written discourse, while also permitting processes and activities in the context of a pedagogy of multiliteracies – without, however, stating this explicitly. Parallel to the previously mentioned, there are also targets concerning more clearly the writing system, such as '*children should locate sounds in the beginning and ending of words*', '*recognize the segmentation of the speech chain into minor units, the sounds of language, and the fact that sounds correspond to letters*', '*adopt basic conventions of the alphabetic system*'. Finally, there are targets which postulate a clear divide between texts and images, i.e. '*children should realize that written language is representation of language and image is representation of the world*'.

As far as writing is concerned, the Curriculum emphasizes that kindergartners, even before being able to write by themselves, should '*realize the meaning of writing as a means of communication, exchanging of ideas, conveying information and personal pleasure by dictating texts to their teacher*'. Recognizing the social purpose of texts is considered to be a basic target for early childhood Education, as it is proposed that children should '*realize that texts are always addressed to specific readers and learn to modify them accordingly*'. In the frame of the psychogenesis of writing belongs the target that '*children should be encouraged to write however they can*', which is the main procedure adopted by the Curriculum. Finally, children are proposed to sign their productions by their name and copy words in the frame of daily activities.

3.2. The kindergarten teacher's Guide

The Guide for the kindergarten teacher (Dafermou, 2006) complements the Curriculum and they both constitute the official instructions for Greek early childhood Education. The eighth chapter of the Guide refers to literacy, a term that is explicitly stated for the first time in the instructions, as Hatzissavidis (2007) points out. Elaborating the targets of the Curriculum, the authors of the Guide mention that '*written language in kindergartens aims to familiarize all children with the texts' language so as to develop motives for its learning and use*' (Dafermou, 2006: 108) and that literacy activities should be '*centred in meaning than in the development of separate skills*'' (Dafermou, 2006:109), thus, 'l*earning the code is necessary though not sufficient in order to learn the written language*'. The Guide emphasizes the need to work with '*different kinds of print and various texts*' *(112)* and stipulates that reading and writing activities in kindergartens should have functional and communicative targets.

3. Discussion - some comments

Taking as its starting point the view that the pedagogy of multiliteracies is a necessity for education and, especially for language teaching and learning; the paper discusses the Curriculum and the kindergarten teacher's Guide and attempts to define the official point of view regarding literacy and multiliteracies in Greek early childhood Education.

First of all, an important change of terminology should be noted among the two official documents. Instead of '*reading and writing*', the Guide not only adopts the term '*literacy*' but also, in principle, literacy is conceived in its social context.

Though both documents adopt a text based approach and emphasize the necessity to develop literacy in kindergartens by means of various text types, instances can be noted where this procedure is not always followed. Targets such as '*children should understand that whatever said, can be written*', mainly stress the role of writing as a representation of speech, than its independence as a semiotic system. Certainly, writing is a means to represent speech but written language is not the print equivalent of oral. There are major differences between the two modes and different medium affordances, thus focusing on the ground that writing represents speech may lead children to adopt rather restrictive options of literacy.

Equally important is the issue concerning classroom's environmental print. The importance of this kind of texts in the development of literacy though mentioned in the Curriculum is more accentuate in the Guide. By this term, the Guide refers to all kind of 'texts' where words are followed by images that depict the semantic field of words,

concerning various topics of everyday activities in kindergartens, i.e. lists of children's names, colors, weather predictions, days of the week, names of known tales etc. Leaving aside the list with the kindergartners' names, which has proved to be a valuable tool in promoting literacy, filling classrooms with this kind of print can be both ineffective and problematic. Although the authors of the Guide propose to keep these lists hanging on the walls only for as long as the specific topic is under elaboration, kindergartens are saturated with lists on various topics regardless of which one is under discussion. More important though is the fact that these lists are merely scholar texts, never to appear in life after school, different in form and structure from everyday social texts. Furthermore, presenting a word through an image always bears the risk of leading to wrong and restrictive associations and interpretations.

Although the Curriculum and the Guide refer to the necessity to enable kindergartners to convey information from texts with images and language, emphasis is always given to one mode. The examples of texts' analysis presented in the Guide relate to information conveyed mainly by language. Moreover, print remains the unique medium for literacy in the kindergartens. This is quite obvious in targets, such as *'adopt basic conventions of the alphabetic system, i.e. read from left to right and from top to bottom of a page'* which restrict the limits of reading solely to print, and moreover to the typical reading of a monomodal text. There are always multiple reading paths to approach a text regarding one's interests, abilities and needs.

Finally, the most important issue refers to the need for critical approach of texts in kindergartens. There is no indication in the Curriculum or the Guide that texts are not neutral but structured in such a way as to present certain points of view and silence others. As Street points out, *'learning to read and write is always embedded within a social context and purpose for meaning making, often situated with structures of power'* (Street, 1993).

4. Conclusion

Although the official instructions for literacy in the Greek kindergarten mark a clear line away from pure psychological views and introduce socio-cultural approaches to literacy, there are still steps to overcome in order to efficiently prepare children for today's increasingly changing society. The demand for a multiliteracies' pedagogy still remains unfulfilled.

As kindergartners live in a multicultural, multimodal and multimedia society, they have to be educated so as to use the different mediums functionally and critically, to make and produce meaning in many modes and to develop critical literacy.

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