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The effect of a learning group in the understanding of the structure of illustrated short stories for children of a preschool age

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Abstract

Belonging to a group is one of the basic children’s needs. Integrating children into the school group is of utmost importance for the development of the educational process because they are involved emotionally, mentally and visually in the resolution of problems, proposals and constructions. By integrating into the learning groups, children, try to understand the educational material influenced not only by their own learning style but also by the learning methods other members of the group adopt. Thus, children in learning groups are able to reformulate the content of the communication process, draw conclusions and make generalisations, and eventually enhance their knowledge. The objective of the present research is to examine the degree to which learning groups contribute to the understanding of the structure of illustrated short stories. In other words, learning in a learning group will be evaluated and compared to learning based on individual effort. To this end, a pilot research was planned in two kindergartens (one located in an urban area and another in a rural village) over a three month period (March - May 2012). Sixteen toddlers (4.5 - 5.5 years), were placed randomly into two groups (experimental and monitoring groups) so as to take part in this research which was conducted in two-phases. Initially a pre-test was given to both groups while at the end of the second phase, they took a post test. A teaching intervention was designed to take place twice a week for both groups for approximately 30 minutes. During the intervention the experimental group worked in small subgroups comprising three to four members, while the members of the monitoring group worked individually. The analysis of the data showed that learning in groups promotes understanding of small stories as compared to individual learning.

Keywords: learning group, illustrated short stories, preschool age, Group work

1. Introduction

In all social environments and in all cultures children wish to socialise with other children, and thus a big part of learning, if not the biggest, emerges or results from the interactions of the groups (Katz et al, 1990). However, there are only three preschool education curricula that promote work in small learning groups: the High/Scope curriculum of “High objectives”, Reggio Emilia’s program, and the educational program for all children (Roopnarine and Johnson, 2006). In the Greek context, the latest curriculum includes a chapter devoted to work and games in groups in the Kindergarten Teacher’s Book (Dafermou, et al. 2006). Furthermore, little has been done in examining the contribution...
of learning in groups to the comprehension of illustrated short stories by preschool children in Greek state preschool education. Thus, the objective of the present research is to investigate the degree to which learning in groups contributes to the toddlers’ understanding of the structure of illustrated short stories. More specifically, the role and the importance of kindergarten’s life acquire a relatively new dimension in the learning process. However, there are related researches as (Anagnostopoulou, 2001; Avgitidou, 2008; Moumoulidou & Rekalidou 2010).

In other words, it is examined if learning in groups as compared to learning individually can influence preschoolers’ performance.

The term learning group is employed to refer to a group of people (adults and children) that are emotionally, mentally and visually involved in the resolution of problems, in the configuration of meanings and in the creation of structures. It is a group in which each member learns not only as an individual but also through the learning methods of others. In group learning, the individual finds new perspectives and acquires strategies as well as new thought processes. Individuals as group members also learn by modifying, extending, clarifying and enriching their own ideas with the ideas of others. Most importantly, learning groups facilitate a type of learning which is different from that of individual learning as far as quality is concerned. In other words, the focus is on collective comprehension, which entails continuous comparison, discussion and modification of ideas which in turn develop learning to such a degree that cannot be achieved during individual learning. In a learning group, individuals bring up ideas for discussion, circulating one after another thus promoting collective knowledge (Krechevsky and Mardell, 2001).

Of particular importance is the evaluation of the learning group, because not only does it shape the process of constructing knowledge but also it provides kindergarten teachers with the opportunity to compare what they expected to happen with what actually happened during the learning process, to become aware of it and teach children a structured way to remember their own progress, knowledge, and doubts. It also offers the children an opportunity for reflection and self-assessment.

By the term understanding we mean children’s ability to visualize the meaning of a form of communication that is given to them in writing or orally through pictures. In this case, the child is able to reformulate its content, to see the relation between its parts and to reach conclusions and generalisations (Trillianos, 2003:143). “It is the process of constructing the intellectual representation, which draws its elements from the text” (Sfiroera, 1998:108) or “is an interaction between the active thought of the reader and what the text says” (Curto et al, 1998[b]: 115).

Preschoolers’ understanding of texts is quite important and constitutes a source of pleasure and creation, through information, briefing, critical thought, socialization, independence; it is also an essential precondition for every form of success (Vamvoukas 1990, Porpodas 2002). Children learn to understand texts through discussions with other readers (Smith, 2006: 430), through interacting with a variety of texts including poetry, advertising pamphlets etc. In doing so they connect reading with writing and speaking as they constitute thought processes that focus on the creation of meaning, are related with reactions, and promote the interaction of children with texts and with other children (Pearson, 2001). Specifically, there are two categories of studies that examine the ways children learn to understand stories over the past thirty years: Those that support reading
out aloud as a means of understanding illustrated stories, and those that consider that all “children are facilitated in the comprehension of a story by its reconstruction” (Brown, 1975) that is to say through theatrical games. More analytically, the first category includes research that supports that the reading out aloud of stories during preschool age enables children to understand stories, to recognize the basic elements of literature and their functions (Hickman 1981, Cochram-Smith 1984, Kiefer 1988, Purcell-Gates 1988). Studies that support theatrical games, as a means of understanding the structure of the story belong to the second category (Sachs et al, 1984); that is to say, children’s participation in theatrical games, the verbal reconstruction of the story as well as their interaction with peers within the context of the story, enhance their understanding (Miccinnati and Phelps 1980; Pellegrini and Galda, 1982).

More analytically, the research questions are:

- What is the role and the importance of team work over individual?
- What is the appropriate group size for preschoolers?
- What is the teacher’s role in a group learning?

2. Method

2.1. The sample

The research was conducted in 2012 in two public kindergartens in the Prefecture of Florina, Greece: one in the city of Florina and another in a village nearby. It lasted three months from March up to June. In total sixteen toddlers between the ages of four and a half and five and a half years participated. Each class was divided into two groups: the experimental group with four boys and four girls and the monitoring group with 7 boys and one girl. The children were randomly put into each group.

For the teaching intervention, 12 illustrated short stories were selected and taught in the same sequence by the two kindergarten teachers that participated in the research. The criteria with which the illustrated short stories were selected were the following:

- The plot can be predicted because of the illustrations
- It is a narrative by approved Greek and foreigner writers and illustrators.
- Their content is varied pleasant so as to cultivate the preschoolers’ imagination.

The research was conducted in two phases. As for the experimental group the teaching intervention involved teaching the group as a whole, while in the monitoring group it involved individual teaching.

The toddlers were evaluated both before and after the teaching intervention by taking pre and post tests (Benett, 1984; Sanders, 1992; Bloom and Quint 1999; Guba and Lincoln, 1981).

The phases of the research

- First phase: pre- test

Both groups were asked to attend individual structured interviews that lasted approximately twenty minutes for each child and took place in a specifically designed space of the kindergartens in the period from the 29th to the 31st March 2012. The kindergarten teacher initially read the illustrated short story by Trivizas “The Congested Rooster” (Ο συναχωμένος κόκορας) and when the reading ended, she filled in the following outline of the narrative with the comments of the children.

Outline of the Narrative (Gambrell & Dromsky, 2000)
The initial measurement helped us determine the potential differences and interactions that may exist in the population which had to be taken into consideration during the final measurement.

- Second phase: The teaching intervention and the “plot dice”

In short, the process of the intervention based on the use of the “plot dice” is as follows:

- 1st step: Reflection
  The children are given pictures from an illustrated story and they are asked to create their own story, with the aim of narrating, elaborating and recording the story, so that it can be sent to children of other kindergartens in order for them to read it and comment.

- 2nd step: Composing and narrating the story
  In this phase the children are called upon to “read”/ observe the suggested pictures from an illustrated short story and afterwards to place them in a reasonable sequence so as to create their own story with a beginning, a middle and an end, and then to narrate it. This is a way to make children understand the elements of the narration and use them for the composition of their own story. In brief, by creating their own story they become more familiar with the narrative structures of a literary story.

- 3rd step: Interpreting the story through the use of the “dice plot”
  After the composition of the story the children with the kindergarten teacher attempt to interpret the story created by the group. In doing so they use the magical “dice plot” which has to be thrown by each child and when the dice stops the child is required to recognize the word on the top, explain how it is connected to the story and comment on it. The dice stops being thrown when all the words written on its sides are presented. In this way children describe, explain, comprehend and interpret the story they created through the pictures. When the game with the “plot dice” finishes, so do the elaboration and the interpretation of the story. Then the children are led to the next step which is reconnecting or re-linking the story.

- 4th step: Recomposing/re-linking, recording and posting the illustrated story.
  In this phase the recomposition or the re-linking of the story takes place. The children recount the story that the teacher recorded using the narrative outline. Then the teacher reads slowly and clearly, always showing the words, then the children try “to read” them. Finally, the story is put in an envelope so that it will be sent to children at other kindergartens.

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The “plot dice” is a cube made of paper or plastic or chipboard. On each side there is one of the words: Beginning, Problem, End, 1st Event, 2nd Event and a blank side.
✓ 5th step: The kindergarten teacher reads the story

In the final phase the kindergarten teacher reads the actual illustrated short story in order for the children to appreciate the perspective of the writer.

• Third phase: post test

Upon completion of the teaching intervention the post test was conducted (Fitz - Gibbon and Morris, 1987). In this phase, which took place from 5th - 8th June 2012, the same process as in the pre test was followed. The kindergarten teacher read the illustrated short story by Trivizas “The Congested Rooster” (O Sinaxwmenos Kokoras) to each child separately and when the narration ended, she filled in the narrative outline with comments made and words used by the preschooler.

The post test measured the results that were expected to be noted in the population and constitute the dependent variable of the present research activity. The same tools were employed for both the initial and final measurements which referred to the same dexterities, so that we could have the best possible information about the influence and the effectiveness of two teaching programs. It is often difficult to determine with precision the one-track effect of one specific factor because those involved in the research are social subjects. However, we tried to ensure the satisfactory and necessary conditions that would limit the contribution of random social factors (Stocking, 1999).

The collection of the data was done with the use of interviews and the answers of the children were graded by researchers based on cognitive achievements and the perception of objectives. The grading of the answers was done by two adjudicators, so as to ensure the greatest possible objectivity (Benett 1984, Stocking 1999). The evaluation of the results of the program was based on the differences in achievement between the two groups during their initial and final measurements. Provided that other factors have been excluded, these differences are directly related to the outcomes of the program.

3. Results

The toddlers in the experimental group as well as those in the monitoring one got the lowest grade in question (2). As opposed to the outcomes in the monitoring group where the intervention by the teacher did not produce any successful results, the teaching intervention in the experimental team showed that there was an improvement in understanding (0,12 units). It becomes obvious then that the teaching intervention referring to the group as a whole contributed to achieving better results for each question of the interview. On the other hand, the individualized teaching intervention applied in the monitoring group did not improve the preschoolers’ understanding of the story. This is reflected in the results of each question of the interview.

Table 1: Average value and correct variations of the grades of each question and overall grades for the experimental group and the monitoring group, before and after the intervention by the teacher.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Before the intervention by the teacher</th>
<th>After the intervention by the teacher</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experimental Group</td>
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Table 2: Average value and correct variations of the overall grades of the experimental group and the monitoring group, before and after the intervention by the teacher.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Question 1</td>
<td>1,63</td>
<td>0,518</td>
<td>2,00</td>
<td>0,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>0,63</td>
<td>0,518</td>
<td>1,75</td>
<td>0,707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 3</td>
<td>1,00</td>
<td>0,926</td>
<td>1,63</td>
<td>0,518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 4</td>
<td>1,75</td>
<td>0,463</td>
<td>2,00</td>
<td>0,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 5</td>
<td>1,25</td>
<td>0,886</td>
<td>1,88</td>
<td>0,354</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Monitoring Group

| Question 1 | 1,38 | 0,744 | 1,25 | 0,926 |
| Question 2 | 0,63 | 0,744 | 0,63 | 0,886 |
| Question 3 | 1,13 | 0,991 | 1,00 | 0,916 |
| Question 4 | 1,63 | 0,518 | 1,50 | 0,926 |
| Question 5 | 0,63 | 0,744 | 1,25 | 0,463 |

It is characteristic that the Average Value (Mean) of the overall grades of the experimental team increased by 4.25 units, while the Average Value (Mean) of the monitoring group increased only by 0.88 units. The effect of the intervention by the teacher is obviously greater for the experimental team.

The monitoring of cross-correlations confirmed the experimental group’s better performance after the intervention by the teacher (F = 6.721, p < 0.05 and t = 3.861, p < 0.01) while no essential difference was shown in its performance at the pre-test.

The cross-correlations of the overall grades according to gender and the degree of urbanisation (urban and rural region) show no differentiations between the two phases of measurements, nor between the two groups.

Discussion

The above data allowed to recommend certain suggestions in regard to the main aim that we set out before the research was conducted, that is to say, to investigate the different effects of group and individual learning in the understanding of the structure of illustrated short stories.

The basic finding is that in four out of five questions relating to the outline of the narrative the children of the experimental group showed significant improvement, while little improvement was shown in one question «After that», as opposed to the children of the monitoring group. We attribute this fact to:

a. Group work which contributes to the processes of development and learning of a child (Germanos, 2000), and positively influences cognition (Edwards et al. 2001). It promotes and enhances rationalization and negotiation skills (Katz et al., 1990),...
it reinforces creative thought (Matsangouras, 2000) and most importantly, it fosters the creation of collective knowledge and understanding to which children who work individually, have no access (Krechevsky & Mardell, 2001). Johnson and Johnson (1989) have already supported that group work for the achievement of a common objective leads to greater success, more involvement in thoughts of a superior level, more frequent production of new ideas and solutions, and more conveying of knowledge from the group to the individual. Furthermore, Slavin established that from the 45 studies that he conducted, 37 showed a higher academic performance through learning in groups as compared to individual learning (Anagnostopoulos, 2001: 34).

b. The small size of the group and the cooperation that developed between its members. It is necessary for learning groups in kindergarten to be small (2-4 toddlers), because children express more positive sentiments when they are in smaller groups (Cummings and Beagles-Ross, 1983), get involved in discussions (Howes and Rubenstein, 1985), are more creative and cooperative (Ruopp et al, 1979), greater confidence develops between the members, the feelings of responsibility become more intense and closer interpersonal relations are cultivated (Charalambous, 1996).

c. The role of the kindergarten teacher. The role of the kindergarten teacher in a learning group is that of a co-participant. Her participation consists in her ability to listen, observe, facilitate the discussion, determine the objectives, function as a source, intervene when the children need her to, provide opportunities for discovery and delight. Participation also means that the kindergarten teacher shapes the process of the construction of knowledge, realizes along with the children that to work, to feel and to think together is of equal importance to the actual content of learning and above all, it confirms that learning groups create culture and knowledge (Krechevsky and Mardell, 2001). When children engage in adialogue with adults’ support, we discover that they reconstruct their past knowledge, they cooperate and collaborate in structuring the revised knowledge about the research topic and they undertake active role in the production and acquisition of knowledge and understanding. Additionally, various situations are being created, full of dilemmas so as to offer children opportunities to make decisions and see the consequences and to suggest alternative solutions.

On the other hand, from the qualitative observations of the two groups, what emerged was that the experimental team improved their vocabulary, a fact that was confirmed by another research which showed that illustrated short stories contribute to the enrichment of the vocabulary of toddlers (Sivropoulou-Chatzisavvides, 2002). Moreover, it appeared that in the experimental group the children’s critical thinking improved through interpretations, rationalizations and questions related to the stories created by themselves. It should still be noted that in order to make up their own story, children of the experimental group, activated their previous knowledge which meant that in order to achieve reading comprehension the children built active relations between what was already known to them and the new information provided by the illustrated story (Gambrell and Dromsky, 2000).

An example for critical thinking: A story created by the children:

Once upon a time a child and his parents went on a trip to Florina to the mountains. It
was snowing and because they felt cold they lit a fire to warm up, and there were some elderly people who helped them. But a lot of children were cut off on the mountains in Vigla and they could not get down. The police then arrived and helped them to come down so that they wouldn’t freeze. Then they came down and returned home and went to the park and played with the children.

The present study should be considered an initial investigation of the degree to which work in small learning groups in kindergartens contributes significantly to the comprehension of the structure of illustrated short stories as opposed to individual work. It would be useful if it were repeated in a bigger student population in order to further investigate other parameters such as the quality and the quantity of interactions that develop in small groups or to verify the duration of the results so that they can be generalisable.

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Aggeliki Tsapakidou, Argyrios Kyridis, Eirini Sivropoulou: The effect of a learning group in the understanding of the structure of illustrated short stories for children of a preschool age


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Smith, F. (2006). Comprehending reading: A psycho-literary analysis of reading and the learning of...
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Illustrated short stories that were used in the intervention by the teacher

«Unique Melpo», (The original Greek title is «Η Μέλπω η Μοναδική»), Maria Rousaki, Papadopoulos, 2001.

«Something Special” (The title is «Το κάτι άλλο»), Katherine Cave & Chris Rinds, Patakis, 1997.

«Nancy the little Gosling», Eve Tharlet, pub. Patakis.

«The marrow and the elf» (The original Greek title is Η κολοκυθιά και το ξωτικό), Nicholas Andrikopoulos, Ellinika Grammata, 2003.


«Melpo will be mad», (The original Greek title is Ποιος ακούει τη Μέλπω), Maria Rousaki-Villa, Papadopoulos, 2003.


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Brief biographies

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Aggeliki Tsapakidou, Argyrios Kyridis, Eirini Sivropoulou: The effect of a learning group in the understanding of the structure of illustrated short stories for children of a preschool age

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