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INTERCULTURAL LEARNING IN NATURE DURING EARLY CHILDHOOD:

INSIGHTS FROM A PEDAGOGICAL COMMUNITY

Aikaterini Varella*

ABSTRACT

This article discusses empirical pedagogical findings from a kindergarten setting inside a refugee camp, which operated on the greek border island of Lesvos from 2017 to 2020. This self-organized pedagogical community hosted both local and asylum-seeking children and operated according to the values of libertarian, intercultural and outdoor education. The article is based on a self-published text, drawing from the pedagogical team's daily documentation archives, interviews with the team, and research of the relevant literature. The author, who was herself a member of the pedagogical team, discusses some of the characteristics of an interculturally competent educator, before posing the main question of the article: How did outdoor education foster intercultural encounters among children of early childhood age in the above-described pedagogical community? The article claims that the natural environment does not reproduce stereotypes

*__Aikaterini Varella__ studied Law in the Aristoteles University of Thessaloniki and has a master degree in Childhood Studies and Children's Rights from the Free University of Berlin, 1 Agnostou Stratiotou Str., GR-54631, Thessaloniki katerina.varella@gmail.com

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related to culture, gender, or age; that it offers common bonding experiences and fosters cooperation and solidarity; and that it allows freedom of movement and choice, which work in favor of intercultural encounters. Last but not least, that by introducing respect for all natural beings, outdoor education can cultivate empathy and respect for diversity in a broad sense. For these reasons, the connection between outdoor and intercultural education merits further research.

Keywords: intercultural learning, intercultural education, pedagogical community, cooperation, solidarity

Introduction: The frame and the original text

This article discusses empirical pedagogical findings from a self-organized kindergarten setting on the greek border island of Lesvos. From 2017 to 2020, Mikros Dounias hosted 18 local and 31 asylum-seeking children, aged 2.5 to 6 years, in a small forest inside the self-organized PIKPA Refugee Camp. Mikros Dounias (hereinafter 'MD') was an initiative of local parents and educators and operated according to the decisions of a weekly assembly with flat hierarchy. The pedagogical community of educators and children functioned on a daily basis according to the values of libertarian, intercultural and outdoor education.

I was fortunate to be a member of MD's pedagogical team from its founding, until the evacuation of PIKPA Camp by the Greek state three years later. Hoping to contribute to the discourse on intercultural education for inclusion, the team (hereinafter 'we') decided to collect data and write a text on the intercultural encounters that took place during MD's operation. The text, *Intercultural Encounters in Mikros Dounias,* is available online in english, greek, and german.

In writing that text, I examined the community's pedagogical documentation records, which were product of daily observation and reflection in team. Together with a colleague, we conducted interviews with four members of MD's pedagogical team (hereinafter, excerpts *in italics* stem from these interviews) and enriched these experiential materials with theoretical references.

For the purposes of the SMOOTH Conference and this article, I chose and elaborated on part of this text. The reason I choose this subject was its originality; namely, the connection between outdoor and intercultural education is rarely found in the literature. We strongly recommend further research on this topic.

Base: The interculturally competent educator

Working with children of really young age and different backgrounds, our pedagogical team soon confirmed that intercultural competence[i] is not a characteristic that we are born with, but rather one that is cultivated. In order to accompany children in developing their own intercultural competence, educators need to first and constantly cultivate their own. How can they do that, according to our experiences with team members and volunteers in MD?

First—as provocative as it might sound—an interculturally competent educator recognizes that, no matter one's ideological stance, everyone carries elements of racism in them. As one team member put it, *'after*

three years in MD, I can't say that I have eliminated all forms of racism in me, but there's a lot of work going on, on an emotional and ideological level'. The more substantial our engagement with the 'other', the more profound the aspects of ourselves that we discover. In essence, we encounter our latent, deeply ingrained prejudices, which we identify and try to overcome step by step. *'I feel that, as time goes by, I become more culturally sensitive, more clear-sighted. The deeper we go, the more we deconstruct.'*

Interculturally competent educators continuously reflect upon elements of their own culture, questioning everything that they perceive as 'natural'. At the same time, they approach 'foreign' cultures with an open heart and mind. In essence, they hold a critical stance towards all cultures, starting with their own.

Moreover, they understand that the contemporary breed of racism, which prevails in post-colonial Europe, no longer argues on the basis of biological difference, but rather on cultural difference, claiming that the equal communication between some cultures is impossible due to their 'incompatibility' (Balibar in Govaris 2011: 113). The aim of interculturally competent educators is to facilitate this communication on a daily basis.

When accompanying children with a non-dominant ethnicity or meeting their families, interculturally competent educators are ready to give but also to receive on both mental and material levels. Failing to receive is often linked to the guilt emerging from the consciousness of problems stemming from overwhelming external realities, which are beyond the educators' power (Papadopoulos 2019: 165). Yet failing to receive indicates a sense of pity and latent feelings of superiority, which cannot but hinder equal encounters. Interculturally competent educators train themselves in choosing empathy[ii] instead of 'privilege guilt'.

Interculturally competent educators accompany children in their contact with the 'other'. For Lobrot, fear can be born merely from the fact that something is unknown to us. The new is appreciated, as long as the child is led to acknowledge it in a positive environment (2018: 107). *'I think that the adult's role is to create a safe, familiar environment, where the child can boldly explore the new',* shares a team member of MD. In order to create such an environment, interculturally competent educators use appropriate, updated pedagogical tools, as well as their intuition, demonstrating adaptability and resilience. They trust themselves as educators, and the children as equal co-creators of the pedagogical setting. They care for, love, and forgive themselves and their colleagues.

This raises the question: what is an optimal environment for them to practice the above, according to our experience in MD?

Suggestion: The natural environment is an optimal space for intercultural pedagogical encounters

Among the values and methods that the community of MD chose[iii] and developed was outdoor education. How did learning in nature facilitate intercultural encounters among children of early childhood age? In our three years of operation, we observed the following:

a. The natural environment does not reproduce stereotypes

Being in nature alleviated differences and offered tangible ways out of cultural classifications such as ethnicity, gender, and adulthood vs. childhood. We realized that the natural environment does not reproduce stereotypes related to:

...culture: Buildings, materials, books are carriers of cultural characteristics, whereas the stimuli and materials for discovery and play that we encounter in nature do not represent the dominant culture. Nature is culturally neutral.

...gender: In nature, there are no materials or activities intended solely for boys or girls; the branches are not pink or blue depending on whom they are addressed to. To support this aspect, the educators need to try to follow their individual inclinations and not the gender identities that have been socially attributed with.

... age: The coexistence of children and adults in nature seems to have a balancing effect on adultism, i.e. the discrimination against children on the grounds of their young age. Here are a few observations of the MD pedagogical team:

> *The child is freer to enact their own initiatives in nature rather than in a house built and decorated by adults.*
>
> *In the company of children in nature I learn, I remember what it's like to observe, to experiment, to get dirty. I am living with the seasons, I am experiencing real time.*
>
> *In nature, I can't help but admire children's observation skills. They can see, hear, and smell things that I do not perceive. A. asks me 'What was that?' and, of course, I haven't heard anything. 'Listen, listen!' he says, and I realize that I need to make an effort to be able to listen, just like he does in order to count to five.*

Heldal et al., who conducted research in MD, remark that by being diverse and multifaceted, the natural environment offers challenges and

possibilities for all children, irrespective of their cultural background, gender, and age (2021).

b. Nature offers a fertile ground for unifying common experiences

According to Magos, both intercultural and environmental education focus on pupils' experiences (Magos 2022: 62). Heldal et al. have found that playing in nature contributes to children's active learning through experiences (2021). An educator in MD adds, *'in nature, learning accompanies experience, it is the experience. Every shared experience brings us together'*.

In the natural environment, children who speak different languages[iv] embody experiences that offer common vocabulary and new communication codes: *'It's much easier to talk about something when you see it, feel it, touch it'*. Furthermore, by repeating similar activities outdoors, children improve their linguistic skills and learn to communicate despite cultural and linguistic barriers (Heldal et al. 2021).

c. The natural environment fosters cooperation and solidarity

Another point of intersection between intercultural and environmental education is the key roles of cooperation and group activities (Magos 2022: 65). As confirmed by MD team members:

> *In nature, there are times that children's ideas cannot be implemented without the help of others, so they understand the value of cooperation firsthand. Solidarity and cooperation prove to be essential elements.*
>
> *Cooperation becomes unavoidable and is desired by everyone, since one can easily move a model brick to build a model house, but what about a real log? Or digging a puddle or climbing a high tree branch? These kinds of activities require company!*
>
> *A walk in the woods fosters solidarity. If someone is left behind, we wait for them. If somebody falls, they are picked up by another child. If a child gets hurt or lost, everyone feels responsible to help.*

Furthermore, we observed that the pursuit of a common goal weakens segregations. In order to facilitate this effect, we built constructions out of wood, rope, and other materials in MD's outdoor space; these would not function unless two or more children worked together.

d. Nature allows freedom of movement and choice

The freedom of movement offered by the natural environment, combined with an accordingly structured pedagogical frame, literally enables the

physical and social contact between children. We realized the latter when a greek child attending MD moved on to the public school; he reported having absolutely no contact with the only child with a refugee background in his class. After questioning, his mother solved the mystery: *'But mum, how can we hang out if he's sitting ten desks away from me?'*

Furthermore, finding a personal space where a child can engage with their own individual activities is difficult in a traditional classroom, whereas the natural environment enables children to choose whether to be alone or with others at any given moment.

A factor that helps is the ample space. In nature, a child can run, shout, walk away from the other children. This possibility takes the pressure off and lets one go deep in oneself. We observe that Children often choose to be alone, in order to calm down, think or play.

The immediate availability of personal space and time, whenever needed, gives the children the chance to calmly, willingly, and genuinely meet each other, whenever they wish.

e. Outdoor education cultivates respect for diversity

A part of outdoor education is learning to respect all forms of life. As newcomers in MD, many children would behave violently towards various living creatures: throwing stones at dogs, killing worms or spiders, uprooting plants. As they became part of an outdoor pedagogical setting, they would gradually learn to observe, feel and take care of the natural world:

> *When children started cutting off flowers to bring them to me as a present, I thanked them for thinking of me but suggested that we might want to think of the flowers too, because now they would wither. We placed the flowers inside the yurt, in order to see them the following day. It so happened that back then we would observe a flower every day to see what time it opens its petals—thankfully, this one had been spared. The following day, we went to smell this flower and the children suggested that we also see the ones they had cut. When they saw what had become of them, we discussed that we would never see them again like we used to, because they had died. We decided that it is better both for us and for them to leave them in peace.*
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> And:
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> *Children have the opportunity to observe the time it takes for a leaf to grow and a bud to bloom, and this makes them respect this effort.*

In fostering this respect, we avoided anthropomorphic projection (e.g., the ant has children and they will cry at home if we kill it) and anthropocentric benefit (e.g., we protect trees, because they provide us with oxygen). This way, we demonstrated that the natural environment is valuable on its own, by nature of its very existence, not just for sustaining us humans.

Furthermore, cultivating respect for all natural beings gives rise to the sense of empathy—a cornerstone of intercultural competence—and to respect for diversity in a broad sense. To wit:

> *An example is that of approaching wild animals, birds, lizards, etc. The child needs to feel the fear and reluctance of an animal, in order to be able to approach it. They need to calm down and take time to make the animal feel safe. This not only helps children acquire empathy for animals, but also encourages them to put themselves in someone else's shoes when they try to connect with people. In essence, they realize their responsibility towards any other being.*

Conclusion

This article has discussed the empirical pedagogical findings from a self-organized kindergarten setting inside a refugee camp. For three years, Mikros Dounias hosted both local and asylum-seeking children, who learned together according to the values of libertarian, intercultural, and outdoor education. The article is based on the self-published text *Intercultural Encounters in Mikros Dounias*, which draws from the pedagogical team's daily documentation archives, interviews with the team, and research of the relevant literature.

At the beginning, the article empirically examined what renders an educator interculturally competent, which encompasses a continuous process of learning and repositioning oneself. In order for educators to help themselves and the children to acquire this competence, the educators need to hold an open and critical stance towards all cultures, including their own; to understand how racism works; to give and also to receive; and to respect and trust children, their colleagues, and themselves.

The rest of the article examined how outdoor education had fostered intercultural encounters among children of early childhood age in the pedagogical community of MD. The main points were: first, nature is culturally neutral and does not, itself, reproduce stereotypes of culture, gender, and age. Next, the natural environment offers unifying common experiences and fosters cooperation and solidarity among children. Additionally, nature allows freedom of movement and freedom of choice,

which enable genuine intercultural encounters. Finally, outdoor education fosters respect for all natural beings, thus cultivating empathy and respect for diversity in a broad sense.

We suggest that this domain deserves further research, so that educators can make effective use of nature's ability to support the goals of intercultural education.

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[i] *Intercultural competence* can be defined as the ability to recognize, accept, and handle cultural diversity in a creative way; to explore the differences between cultures, without evaluating them as superior or inferior; to manage the new and the unknown; to react to social injustice and to all forms of discrimination (Magos 2022).

[ii] In the frame of the intercultural discourse, empathy can be defined as the capacity of recognizing "foreigners" as specific individuals and critically confronting the social procedures that lead to their stigmatization (Govaris 2011: 182).

[iii] The choice of outdoor learning was not the outcome of intercultural co-creation, but rather one of the initial decisions that local parents and educators made before meeting the residents of PIKPA camp. Based on their own cultural experiences, the latter often had a completely different impression of what an "educational setting" meant. It was not at all self-evident that children would not dress up, nor that playing with mud is an opportunity to learn. Often, learning in nature was far from what they hoped for their children in the new continent they had arrived in. It was important for us to explain to each family that outdoor learning was a conscious pedagogical choice, not related to lack of facilities. Two factors partially eased the unpleasant feeling of cultural imposition: firstly, the framework seemed to meet the needs and wishes of the children themselves very well; and secondly, the team gradually gained the trust of these parents, as they generally experienced their children calmer and excited to be coming to MD.

[iv] In MD, six different languages and dialects were frequently spoken.