

Leveraging Greek kindergarten students' lifeworlds in cultivating intercultural learning

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ABSTRACT

Modern kindergarten classes are highly diverse. This poses the challenge of the productive use of diversity namely the way students with different biographies (lifeworlds) can understand, learn from, and coexist with "others". Familiarity with diverse biographies is important quality in the learning process as these capture aspects of student diversity that give individual meaning to self-existence. Moreover, biographical narratives in flexible intercultural communicative environments make possible to identify students' starting points (pre-existing knowledge), learning readiness and cultural characteristics that compose identity. Thus, the negotiation of these points in the form of biographical reflections in a dialogical context can expand the understanding of the self, and the "other" as well as form a coherent view about modern world. The output of negotiating and communicating multiple biographical experiences, perspectives, and collaborative intelligence, is a newly generated intercultural learning. This article presents the role of preschool student biographies in cultivating intercultural learning. In this account, diversity is considered both as a learning resource and a learning opportunity.

KEYWORDS

Preschool Children's Biographies, lifeworlds, diversity, intercultural dialogue, intercultural learning

RÉSUMÉ

De nos jours, l'école maternelle est très diversifiée. Cela pose le défi de l'exploitation de cette diversité de manière productive, c'est-à-dire, la façon dont les élèves ayant des parcours de vie différents, sont capables de s'en servir pour comprendre, apprendre et coexister avec les «autres». De plus, dans des contextes communicatifs interculturels, les histoires de vie partagées, tout en préparant les élèves à l'apprentissage, leur permettent aussi d'identifier d'une part leurs points de départ (connaissances préexistantes) et d'autre part les caractéristiques culturelles composant l'identité personnelle. Ainsi, la mise en relation des différents parcours de vie racontées par les élèves sous forme de dialogue(s) peut élargir la compréhension de soi et de « l'autre » et contribuer à la formation d'une vision cohérente du monde contemporain. De ce partage d'expériences s'effectuant entre les élèves résulte un nouveau type d'apprentissage interculturel. Cet article présente le rôle de l'âge préscolaire dans des contextes d'apprentissage interculturel. La diversité est considérée à la fois comme une ressource d'apprentissage et une opportunité d'apprentissage.

MOTS-CLÉS

Biographies des enfants d'âge préscolaire, expériences, âge préscolaire, diversité, maternelle, dialogue, apprentissage interculturel

INTRODUCTION

Diversity is understood as a wide range of material, corporeal and symbolic differences - not just cultural - in the context of *civic pluralism* (Kalantzis & Cope, 2013). Its function is interlinked with the creation of new dynamic spaces of intercultural learning, exchange, and interconnection (Arvanitis, 2016) where differentiated individual biographies are negotiated (Arvanitis, 2015). Educational settings are highly diverse places where diversity occurs both as a learning resource and a learning opportunity. Thus, the productive use of diversity requires a reflective and inclusive attitude toward student biographies (Arvanitis, 2016). In addition, students' complex and diverse lifeworlds make communication potentially intercultural and presupposes awareness of individual diversity (Arvanitis, 2015). Communication between different biographies requires a real interaction, which allows the forging and maintenance of intercultural relationships (Liu, Gallois, & Volcic, 2018). This act of inter-exchange is perceived as an *experience of enrichment* (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002), which implies the adoption of an external perspective on oneself while communicating with "others". This stance allows a person to positively expose its diversity and become approachable to "others" whereas (s)he attempts to understand their perspectives and diverse characteristics (Byram, 2003). Diversity is perceived here as a source of mutual, ubiquitous, and constantly evolving intercultural learning (Arvanitis, 2014).

In this context, adopting an intercultural worldview (Bennett, 2004) implies that students need to cultivate a balance between their individual and global sense of identity (Banks, 2004). This requires the development of intercultural knowledge, attitudes and skills so that students can equally function both within and outside intercultural group boundaries in an effective manner. Thus, building balanced and harmonious relationships, as a result of mutual sharing of "authentic and substantial exchanges of individual experiences" (Ponciano & Shabazian, 2012, p. 23), is important. At the same time, one does not need to give up his/her local-ethnic identity to be a cosmopolitan citizen as this is a source of enrichment in his/her life (Nussbaum, 2002). Modern people need to correlate with the "others" and engage in acts of mobility and exchange in a globalized society (Arvanitis, 2013). In this context, (intercultural) learning takes place through exchanging cultural contents (Ponciano & Shabazian, 2012) and lifeworld experiences (Arvanitis, 2015). The interconnection of intercultural lifeworlds which generates intercultural learning, contributes to the creation of a multidimensional culture (Arvanitis, 2015) which requires well build personalities, narrated lived biographies and flexible skills (Vlachou, 2020a).

This article presents the role of kindergarten students' biographies in promoting intercultural learning. Students' perception of their diversity is presented here as well as the way in which students transform their perception during the inter-exchange of their biographies in an intercultural interactive context. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do kindergarten students narrate their different biographies in an intercultural context producing new intercultural learning?
2. How do students transform their perception of their diversity?

STUDENT LIFEWORLDS IN AN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXT

In modern world, diversity is not limited to its cultural aspects, but it is perceived as a “fundamental process of raising awareness” on the multidimensional nature of differences (Vertovec, 2012, p. 305). This assumption paves the way to the adoption of an inclusive approach to diversity (or superdiversity) including a wide range of *material* (social class, locale, and family), *corporeal* (age, race, sex and sexuality, physical and mental abilities) and *symbolic* (culture, language, gender, affinity, and persona) differences (Kalantzis & Cope, 2013). This way, student diversity and classroom pluralism are understood better through individual and collective differences. However, differences are not always clearly visible due to their complex and in-between intersections.

Moreover, young children's perceptions of themselves and “others” as well as the way these perceptions are reflected in individual and social identity, determine their attitudes towards diversity. Children’s self-image represents their knowledge of themselves and all the beliefs, abilities, and behaviors they hold about themselves as a subject of knowledge. The development of the sense of self projects children’s development as individuals (Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2015). This development is an extremely complex structural part of their personality as it encompasses existing, potential, and imaginary representations of themselves, but also of ‘others’ (Stan, 2015). In addition, the structure of self-image includes the self-concept (Kemple, Lee & Harris, 2015; Stan, 2015), i.e., the multitude of perceptions and knowledge that the child has about the characteristics and properties of self (Stan, 2015). Thus, self-perception is a possibility of self-determination and consequently self-categorization. Finally, the clarification of the “different self” (Vlachou, 2019) concerns the cognitive awareness that the child has about both the various shapes of self (self-schemata) and aspects of his/her diversity. Children’s multilayered identity takes form during the interaction with the social environment and when communicating with the multiple member identities represented in various groups (Swann & Bosson, 2008). The negotiation of identities opens the perspective of an intermediate / third space (Arvanitis, 2014, 2016) in which the possibility of forming new individual geographies and hybrid cultural identities is offered (Arvanitis, 2016).

In this context, learner and social/classroom plurality can be grounded on the notion of “lifeworld differences” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2013). Namely, the expression and multiple representations of lived experience - as a life story - reflects the complexity of diversity (Pineau & Le Grand, 2002) and the multitude of subjective differences in identity. In other words, student lifeworlds could be better identified and clarified through their biographies. The knowledge and utilization of students’ biographies (lifeworlds) in school classes can effectively enhance the interface and the “learning encounter” among students and, thus, support a coherent understanding of their profiles and perception of “others” (Caron, 2007; Dodge, 2005). Student lifeworlds comprised of their daily and general experiences as well as the elements of their identity or the manifestations of their personality/subjectivity (Kalantzis & Cope, 2013). Student personality aspects include a set of habits, attitudes, values, and interests that were formed in a specific context (Kalantzis & Cope, 2013). This refers to a well-defined individual framework of beliefs, skills, and practices that describe how the social world is constructed and experienced (Yelland et al., 2021). Student biographies can also clarify the levels of learning readiness and the starting points identified by pre-existing “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). The learning interests and preferences are also clarified, while students’ learning profile is formed more accurately. Lifeworlds, in essence, capture differences, which are divided into material, corporeal and symbolic (Kalantzis & Cope, 2013).

In addition, biographies provide access to students' inner point of view, ways of experiencing and the content of their individual meaning (Ashworth, 2003). According to Hanses (2004, p. 1) “in a world in which the complexity and functional differentiation of

societies is constantly expanding [...] biography becomes a central axis of orientation to identify the individual in his social 'place'. Thus, biography is more than a narrated life story (Hanses, 2004; Kakabura, 2011). It is a biographical/lived acquired knowledge (Hanses, 2004, p. 1) whereas the possibility of narrating the individual biography involves an important "biocosmic function" (Tsiolis, 2006, p. 126), which concerns the awareness of individuality and uniqueness as a mental shape.

Moreover, individual life stories denote an interconnection between the individual with the social (Kakabura, 2011) as they uncovered a knowledge path toward the reality of social groups. The dialectical relationship between individual and social narratives (Beck, 2000a) projects the individual identity as completely acceptable but also flexible through the constantly changing biographical reconstruction (Alheit, 1994). In this process, *personification* is achieved (Beck, 2000), that is, the perception of the "other" as a person, beyond the boundaries of his/her group. Thus, a persons' self-image acquires substance and becomes visible and concrete and not being weakened in the confined boundaries of a solid group. The awareness of individuality is strengthened in the view of the "other" developing a perspective of social coexistence in intercultural encounters.

In this article we focus on the exchange of biographies during intercultural dialogues in a kindergarten classroom. Emphasis is placed on the content of intercultural encounters (Larzén-Östermark, 2008; Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019) between different biographies during intercultural communication. These settings involve interactive competence and intercultural skills and attitudes, such as curiosity, critical awareness, and perspective-taking skills (Byram, 1997; Byram & Wagner, 2018; Delanoy, 2008). In fact, intercultural dialogue involves the recognition of and genuine interest for the perspectives of "others" and it is strengthened when different perspectives interact constructing shared meanings (Wegerif, 2011). Through interactive discussion participants get the opportunity to move from their personal beliefs and perceptions to different point of views (Vlachou, 2020b). This transformative learning may occur through testing, questioning and documentation, whereas it represents a new perspective of "self" and of the world and /or novel knowledge (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This approach cultivates a culture of dialogue which enhances multiple perspectives of expression as well as an exploratory knowledge building (Alexander, 2008).

Intercultural dialogue involves recognition of different perspectives of "others" and becomes meaningful through the interaction of differences (Wegerif, 2011). The perspectives of "others" contribute to the view of the self, therefore to the inner self-awareness, which is a necessary element of intercultural experience (Cushner & Brislin, 1997). In this process, self-reflection is offered as a method to participants in intercultural encounters to move beyond the exchange of superficial information about the "other" (Cushner & Brislin, 1997) to a more specialized and open knowledge of the "self", and the "other". This knowledge is structured through the experiences of intercultural dialogue/encounters and makes the interaction more efficient (Larzén-Östermark, 2008) and more intercultural (Crichton & Scarino, 2007; Hoff, 2019).

Obviously, interaction can not necessarily lead to agreement. It may lead to mediation and negotiation (Ganesh & Holmes, 2011) of opposite or different views (Liu et al., 2018), as well as to the tolerance of other views through a more careful investigation (Littleton & Mercer, 2013). The ability to mediate different perspectives in the dialogue between "self" and "other" raises the need for awareness (Bennett, 2004) and tolerance as well as the creation of a dialogic space (Byram, 2008) in which new intercultural learning finds room for development (Maine, 2013). The conceptual content of intercultural learning is related to intercultural competence (Byram, 2008; Deardorff, 2006), therefore, to the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in intercultural interaction (Arvanitis, 2011). More specifically, intercultural knowledge focuses on theoretical knowledge (Deardorff, 2006) involving aspects of "native"

and “other” cultures and the basic concepts of the self, the “other” and the world. Intercultural skills focus on reflective management, communication, and application of intercultural knowledge in interactive contexts. Finally, attitudes consider openness, curiosity and willingness to discover new perspectives during the intercultural encounter.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to study the educational experience that allows the exploration of child stylizations (mental representations) of diversity as a consequence of their biography. The adoption of a qualitative approach, namely, the narrative inquiry was deemed as the most appropriate method so to uncover the complexity of such representations. This is evidenced by the fact that preschoolers have narrative skills that focus on narrating personal experiences based on autobiographical recall (McCabe et al., 2008). Telling a story (narration), is a popular method of expression for preschool children (Fivush & Haden, 2003). In addition, it provides multiple perspectives of subjectivity and individual identity, mainly due to the importance given to imagination and human involvement in the construction of a story (Bruner, 1990).

The adopted qualitative research process was revolved around three points: a) the nature of the research questions (Tsiolis, 2014), b) the type of empirical data collected and c) the basic principles of the narrative method. Therefore, research design was developed around student narratives and biographical stories which were unfolded within a context of intercultural dialogue and extended discussions. Narrations offer a different and meaningful way of knowing students’ lived experiences, that is, a way of exploring the subjectivity of their biographies.

The sample of (pre) kindergarten students who participated in this research, was comprised of 20 students (13 boys and 7 girls) enrolled in the same class. Eleven students were Greek, eight of them were of Albanian descent and one was Roma. Students had an average age of four years and nine months. The selection of the sample was based on criteria such as the socio-cultural diversity of student population, the different biographical background of children, their ability to interact and collaborate with each other in focus groups and, finally, their ability to tell their stories. Therefore, sampling was purposeful whereas children participation in specific groups was decided in collaboration with the class teacher after assessing learner profiles. The selection of the school unit in an island region also met the criterion of students’ vibrant intercultural profile and the openness of this particular school to engage in collaborative action research.

Narrative inquiry enabled researchers to observe and record the conditions and dialectical relationships that children developed as they engaged in a narrative experience. Discussions were determined by three main criteria: a) the individual character of the experience, b) the collective nature of the experience and c) the biographical reflection. The research data was collected through three tools: the Focus Group Guide, the Focus Group Observation List, and the Group Drawing. The first tool was a six-question open-ended interview guide implemented in two focus groups so to allow for personal biographies to emerge in an intercultural dialogue context. Discussions were not limited to answering questions, but they were structured in an open communication (Cohen & Manion, 2002) and interactive mode. Additional questions were asked that enhanced students’ ability to cooperate, and to show empathy, as well as tolerance and respect for “others” (Barrett, 2018; Barrett et al., 2013; Chen & Starosta, 2000; Deardorff, 2006).

The second tool was an Observation List with descriptive indicators of positive or negative performance. It was divided into two parts: a) the personal focus where children’s personal perceptions and experiences from the two focus groups were recorded and b) the interpersonal focus which included students’ patterns of communication and interaction in each

group. In addition, inclusive dialogue and positive intercultural climate were built (Broome, 2013) through students' willingness to participate in the dialogue. Patterns that employed were focus on students' ability to express self-perception, personal perceptions, and experiences through short self-references, as well as their ability to understand the uniqueness of self, to freely express emotions, to use linguistic elements, and finally, their ability to exchange ideas in the form of dialogue and show respect while recognizing to "others" the right to freely express themselves.

The third tool was an identity text (group drawing), which gave students the choice of telling a story in a different way (Kress, 1997). Group drawing facilitated intrapersonal and interpersonal dialogues (Brooks, 2005), by depicting children's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, knowledge, but also their interests, and experiences. Overall, these three tools produced rich data with both dialogical/narrative reflections and multimodal depictions (e.g., drawings) of diversity. This allowed for data triangulation (Cohen & Manion, 2002) as the main perceptions of diversity were discussed and transformed through the progression of individual and collective engagement.

Finally, narrative analysis was deployed, namely a combination of thematic, structural and performative/dialogical analysis (Riessman, 2008). "[T]he analysis of narratives and biographies adds a new dimension to qualitative research. It focuses not only on what is said by the subjects and the things or events they describe, but also on the way they are said, on why they are said as well as on emotions and experiences" (Gibbs, 2008, p. 71).

The research was conducted in the school year 2020-2021 whereas approval was obtained by the Ministry of Education and Religion based on university ethics and covid19 protocols. Consent of parent-guardians was obtained for both student interviews and the utilization of anonymized data, material and information related to the research project. Finally, a trustful relationship with school community was built through researchers' purposeful engagement with all stakeholders for a prolong period of six months.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The main research findings revealed the importance of collective thinking and acting in producing new intercultural knowledge and understanding.

i) Students' perceptions of diversity

In relation to the first research question it appears that diversity emerged as the central theme in students' interactive lifeworlds. In students' narratives the image of oneself was portrayed and placed in a group context. Individual self-portraits were then interacted with the image of "others". Each student transferred and presented his/her identity details which, in his/her judgment, differentiate him/her from "others". The exchange of views, formed in this intercultural dialogue, created a suitable field of reflection for confirmation, revision, modification or even negotiation of students' initial knowledge concerning their difference.

During the dialogical exchange of biographies, each group was offered the opportunity to come across new experiences (unknown things or aspects of the known that were not understood before). Thus, "familiarity with unfamiliar things" became "a way of learning in the ever-changing lifeworld" of students (Kalantzis & Cope, 2013, p. 329). For instance, the content of intercultural dialogues unveiled rich biographies and showed that all students had developed an increased disposition for narrative engagement, both at personal and interpersonal level. Nevertheless, three students (out of ten) from the First Focus Group, as well as three other students from the Second Focus Group showed little participation, while one participated as an active listener, but not as a speaker (student with special learning needs). In addition, all

students, without exception, used extralinguistic elements confirming in some way their participation in the group communication in a non-verbal way. For example, P17 expressed his feelings for P20 through physical contact (caressing the hand). This move influenced the interaction and highlighted the quality of their relationship. P20 reacted with applause as a sign of joy and enthusiasm. In addition, P6 encouraged P2 and P15 to participate with eye contact and gestures. They both responded positively by reacting with eye contact, a smile, a shake of the head and timid participation. Finally, all the children showed their agreement or disagreement with characteristic movements of the body parts (e.g., hands, head, etc.) or accompanied their narratives with corresponding static physical movements of dramatization (e.g., demonstration of an act, etc.).

Thematic analysis of biographical references in both focus groups came up with several main categories of coding with regards the cognitive perception and understanding of self, such as: self-descriptions and individual differences, knowledge and attitude, the management of emotions about the “other”, and openness to interaction/cooperation. In the first category (descriptions of self) students made specific references to: personal identity, family relationships, personal interests, visits, experiences with pets, description of homes, people in their social environment, memories (from the past), family events, daily routines, dietary preferences, experiences of extreme phenomena and emotions. Regarding individual differences, students identified differences in material conditions, physical characteristics and symbolic differences (origin, language). Overall, their biographical narratives identified many aspects of themselves and their family context depicting different perspectives of diversity (Table 1).

TABLE 1

Coding students’ biographical perception of diversity and self-understanding

Object of coding	Basic categories of coding for the cognitive perception and understanding of the self in relation to the biographical data	Emerging description field coding categories	Sub-categories coding
Awareness (diversity)	Material conditions	Residence	Area/village
		Family environment	Family composition Parental discrimination
		Property status	Residence/ house
			Pets
	Corporal characteristics	Physical Features	Age
			Sex
			Race
			Skin color
			Head/face shape
			Hair color/ length
			Eye color
			Body anatomy
		Spiritual characteristics	Interests
			Gifts /talents
Weaknesses (Clumsiness)			
Spirituality (Intelligence/Creative thinking /ideas - Sentimentality)			
Glasses			

		Appearance/ clothing / personal items	Clothes/socks/ blouses
			Things/Bags/ Towels
Shoes			
Masks			
Symbolic differences	Nationality	Greek and Albanian	
	Language	Greek and Albanian	

More specifically, students narrated their material conditions (locale, family environment and property status), corporeal characteristics (physical features, spiritual characteristics, and appearance) and symbolic differences (nationality and language) that were meaningful to them relating to individual subjectivity, family, and school contexts. However, student references to differences through short narratives were not always conscious as some students could not clearly perceive the uniqueness of themselves in present time. Self-realization of being different occurred later in time and after group reflections (e.g., students P2, P4, P8 and P10). Indeed, the transformed perception of diversity took place through the mapping of ideas (group drawings) and by meaningfully connecting the distinct phases of group discussions to master more complex conceptualizations (Shaules, 2019). In other words, the personal gaze was expanded and enriched with the gaze of the “other” during the intercultural encounter (Gonçalves & Carpenter, 2013). Group reflections on personal narrations generated a common and authentic understanding of difference enhancing communication. In this third space dialogical context, negotiation, and transformation of perceived elements of identity resulted a “cultural synergy” informed by a “critical cultural awareness” (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p.181). Overall, students' diverse biographies became the starting point in the learning process.

ii) Transforming perceptions of diversity

Concerning the second research question, data from both focus groups showed that a broad, open, and productive intercultural dialogue was developed availing much room for individual biographies to be expressed and intermingled. In this context, several students were more detailed in their narrative descriptions being able to integrate in their biographies new elements that emerged through their interaction with “others”. These students were also able to contribute rich information from their own biographies so to unable other students to obtain awareness of the “self” and the “other” within the group.

The First Focus Group developed an enriched dialogical framework depicting the different aspects of diversity such as cultural diversity (origin and language differences), and gender games and their distinction into girlish and boyish. This group also demonstrated strong communication skills supporting an open dialogue with frequent questioning, vivid debating of personal and contradictory views, negotiating possibilities, as well as encouragement for participation.

In the Second Focus Group, the issue of cultural diversity was also raised through active dialoguing of participants. There were no disagreements. There was strong encouragement for engagement through posing questions and demonstrating feelings of solidarity. Members of the second group encouraged the most introverted students to participate. Especially in the case of a student with special educational needs, the whole group tried to encourage his participation using interesting ways, such as respecting and actively listening to all ideas (Vrikki et al., 2019). The group’s response demonstrated intercultural sensitivity, understanding, openness, respect for diversity and acceptance (Bennett, 2004) so to achieve a productive dialogue. The dialectical relationship developed among group members served as a source of broadening new knowledge acquisition. Excerpt 1 presents the attempt of students P1, P8, P17, P18 and the researchers to identify possible ways of enhancing the participation of P20.

Excerpt 1: Encouragement from the group

P1: *Now it is P20's turn to speak, but he does not speak too much.*

P17: *Almost not at all.*

P1: *Yes, and he copies us sometimes (in the past).*

P18: *He follows us.*

P1: *Or he does not come at all.*

R: *Why do you think he does this?*

P17: *Maybe because he wants to play with us?*

P1: *And-and then why doesn't he tell us?*

P17: *I think he has not yet found the way ((looks at him and smiles)).*

P8: *We should talk to him.*

P17: *We should talk to him so to help.*

P1: *We should help.*

P8: *We should explain.*

P17: *We should give him directions.*

P18: *We should play with him.*

P17: *We should play with him and (.) make him happy. And affectionately touch him. Even if he is a bit different.*

It becomes obvious that group members tried to understand and justify the diversity of the “other”. Their approach is inclusive, and it is associated with the strengthening of “belonging” and including the “other” in the group.

Describing the “self” was an interesting act for some students, particularly students P14 and P18. P14 narrative opened a rich field of discussion. He brought new perspectives of intercultural knowledge concerning the existence of other cultures and languages using his own cultural background.

[P14: *I play kukull. Hmmm... (4) her name is Irepa and Bella.*

P7: *What is that?*

R: *Does anyone know what “kukull” mean?*

P13: *Doll*

R: *Do you maybe also know in what language?*

P13: *Albanian.*

P7: *P14 speaks Albanian?*

P3: *Yes. I knew it. She speaks Albanian because she is from Albania. My grandmother told me, who lives in P. Close to her house.*

P7: *Does she only speak Albanian?*

P3: *She speaks Albanian and kind of Greek.*

P13: *She is from Albania. Like me.*

P7: *Do you, P13, also speak Albanian?*

P13: *Yes.*

P7: *I don't know Albanian, Only Greek.*

P3: *It's because you are not from Albania].*

The Albanian word “kukull” that P14 brought in the group, allowed students to become aware of cultural differences and interact with cultural diversity in a natural way and using their biographical references. Also, linguistic diversity was redefined in relation to the country of origin. This was a reciprocal enriching act as P14 becomes aware of her cultural diversity through group reflections and at the same time the group acquires knowledge of diverse linguistic contexts. Through this discussion the group had an opportunity for reflection, self-analysis and intercultural exchanges in relation to racial and linguistic differences and, thus, it

enriched its intercultural knowledge. For instance, P14 began to redefine herself (“I”) in relation to the “others” (“them”). Initially, her attitude was a rejecting one as she expressed a disposition to engage only with members of the same cultural group [P14: *I do not play with all the others*]. However, P3 showed openness and curiosity in P14’s difference as the Albanian word “kukull” had made an impression.

[P3: *And I want to see what P14 said - the-ko-ku... ((shakes his hands nervously))* (2)

P13: *Kukull.*

P3: *Yes that, I didn’t remember it.*

P14: *Kukull. My Doll.*

P3: *Will you make it?*

P14: *Yes. (she smiled).*

This attitude positively reinforced the involvement of P14 in the group painting. Thus, P14 became a point of positive interest for the group through her cultural difference.

Furthermore, group painting activity gave a different momentum in discussing self /group differences. Picture 1 shows the group painting of the First Focus Group. The painting captures students' narratives in relation to their diversity and after reflecting on these issues in their interactive dialogues that preceded.

PICTURE 1



Group A’ sketch

This picture depicts the process of students’ identity construction based on the group’s intercultural knowledge that developed both for the self and for the “other”. The sketches are analogous to the narratives. They clearly capture all the categories of diversity. Highlights made during the intercultural dialogue were depicted in the sketch. For example, P3 added glasses and black hair, P15 painted his blue ball, P2 painted a dancing dog as she sang using

microphones and P12 painted a football field with adults playing. P14 “learned” the doll in Greek and used the Greek word. P9, who initially had not conceptualized diversity, painted a “different” robot without hands, going beyond the appropriated and compatible robot image projected in the focus group discussion. In this way, he wanted to highlight the beauty of being different by saying: *It is more beautiful because it does not look like other robots* (P9).

Moreover, racial origin and heritage language were clearly stated in the case of P18 (2nd Focus Group). His perception of his diversity is described in a perfectly structured and concise way. P18 presents his ethnic identity as a distinct element of his biography.

[P18: *I am Albanian and Hellenic.*

P8: *Where are you from?*

P18: *From Albania.*

P1: *I didn't know that.*

P8: *Me neither.*

P17: *He speaks very good Greek.*

P18: *I speak Greek and Albanian.*

P1: *Is that hard?*

P17: *I didn't know that.*

P8: *Me neither.*

P18: *But I am more Hellenic].*

In the group sketch (Picture 2) P18 depicts himself between the two flags: Albanian and Greek.

PICTURE 2



Group B' sketch

It seems that P18 utilizes in a meaningful way the cultural symbols of his biography, namely the personal resources he acquired in his country of origin. P18 functions as a creator of culture

and a transmitter of knowledge in intercultural contacts. He has developed strong ties with the country of origin, and he embraces his bicultural/bilingual identity. He is willing to participate in two cultures maintaining strong ties with the Greek context. In school, he chooses to speak Greek. He explained this preference by stating: [P18: *At home we speak Greek and Albanian. I speak more Greek. Mom and dad speak both. I am Albanian and Hellenic. But I am more Hellenic. But I like Greece more because you can buy toys. In Albania I don't know where the toy shops are. I haven't seen them*]. Overall, P18 has strongly constructed his biography using distinct cultural elements and posing possibilities for justifying his choices.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Research data in this paper demonstrates that preschool students are skillful narrators of their diverse biographies. They can state their perceptions and express personal views and attitudes in relation to diversity. Their knowledge is based on individual mental patterns and pre-existing cultural information; all parts of their lifeworlds and lived biographies. This research showed that students can construct and transform perceptions of their diversity through interacting in a participatory space.

More specifically, it appears that students can narrate their biographies in the form of free, spontaneous, open, and unplanned narration. Through these narrations, students make categorizations of themselves, and “others” based on material conditions, physical characteristics, and symbolic differences. Some stories are detailed and analytical with a structured narrative flow and a wealth of experiential information. Some others are short and concise. However, students demonstrate self-awareness. They can determine their initial knowledge about self and associate it with multiple dimensions of their subjectivity and lifeworlds. For example, P13, an Albanian student, speaking about himself, says: “*Dad and I are building houses. He (.) I am helping. We lived in Albania. The house moved and then we left. We went to Athens and now here. We have three children at home and I four (counts with the fingers) and dad and mom. Delisa, Aleandro, Antuel. Mom does not speak like me. She speaks differently*”.

Research data has also shown that students attempt to conceptualize difference based on their individual cognitive patterns which relate to individual and collective/interdependent self-interpretations. In the first case, depiction of “self” takes the form of individual investigation and monitoring. In the second case, it involves social information that affects individual interpretation of self. In addition, experiencing the known comes as the conscious reflection of lifeworlds, (Kalantzis & Cope, 2013) demonstrating different level of learning readiness for each student (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Overall, the knowledge of self and “other” is enhanced during group intercultural dialoguing as cultural knowledge and different perspectives are shared. Thus, students’ intercultural knowledge (many aspects of diversity) is consistently built whereas open and exploratory attitudes enhance skills of intercultural communication, reciprocity, and cooperation. Therefore, intercultural learning is established. Thus, although during the dialogue P4 identified student interests as the only existing difference, he seemed to reconsider his view by stating “*I could not bear to be all the same. That would be ugly*”.

Moreover, new knowledge emerged, based on initial (pre-existing) information. Every new piece of information, though, had been reconstructed as it was processed differently by students so to be meaningful and associated to their lifeworlds. In other words, it appears that “[L]earning is a process of building and signifying personal meaning, and it depends on previous knowledge and emotional shapes of each student, the way they are active, changed and/or enriched” (Ioannidou-Koutselini, 2020, p. 18). Our data showed that student biographies

support the construction of learning and can differentiate the educational process. The different connections of knowledge made by students may enhance or hinder the processing of new information so that new learning can be obtained. The research also showed that all students took an additional step in their learning path in terms of moving from basic/initial knowledge to more complex mental connections. Thus, although initially P14 does not differentiate herself at any point then, and through the interactions, she forms a new perception. She identifies material and symbolic differences whereas readjusts her position in the group with new conceptualizations.

Furthermore, intercultural interactions created a reflective field where (post)cognitive processes consolidated the connecting of new information and its transformation into new knowledge. The exchange of intercultural experiences in this participatory space, made knowledge workable and learning more organized and self-regulated. Thus, “familiarity with unfamiliar things” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2013, p. 329) reinforced the perspective of complex knowledge manifestations. The development of open intercultural dialogue allowed for rich self-biographical narrative discourses and topics to be developed. Issues related to (cultural) diversity such as racial origin and language, disabilities as well as the gender discrimination of toys were raised and negotiated. For example, P6, P7, P10 and P13 raised the issue of gender toys. Their personal experiences opened the field for confrontation and mediation to, finally, overcome the gender stereotypes about girls' and boys' toys.

In this context, the formulation of different perspectives during intercultural encounters contributed to the inner knowledge of the “self”, adding new intercultural dimensions (Crichton & Scarino, 2007; Hoff, 2019). The interaction of biographies enriched intercultural exchange allowing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reorientations and, thus, enhanced the prospects of intercultural learning. A typical example was that some non-Greek students who initially were exclusively associated with their own cultural group, wished to engage with other students. Thus, collaborative learning led to consolidation of new intercultural perceptions on diversity.

Finally, in this intercultural context of communication, both verbal and non-verbal communication were cemented while involvement and participation were encouraged. For example, the eye contact and gestures of P17 encouraged P20 to participate in the group drawing. Students were able to transform their perceptions in the safety of their participatory meeting space whereas learning become meaningful “based on mutual encounters” (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019, p. 590) and “critical reflection” (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). In this space, interculturality emerges from the narrated knowledge (Bruner, 1997) and intercultural interactions. Diversity becomes experientially understood as a “lived experience” (Jaatinen, 2015, p. 731) of everyday reality and it is subject of mutual sharing. Thus, students encountered different perspectives taking into account their own identity. The ability to reflect to and co-solve problems of lifeworld/biographical references created new intercultural learning. Therefore, new knowledge is considered as biographically acquired and a developing perspective of intercultural socializing (Acevedo, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This article focused on the way kindergarten students narrate their different biographies in an intercultural communicative context. This implies a strong group-based exchange orientation that contributes to collectively produced intercultural learning. In other words, group negotiations of differences supported individual students to reach their own potential and further contextualize diversity by realizing their own uniqueness. Students have also enriched their own individual contributions to the group informed by collective thinking. Children

embarked in a thinking together act producing new shared intercultural knowledge and participatory ethos. This approach created a solid experiential context where knowledge is produced by students through free creative pursuits and at the same time is being renegotiated collectively to meaningfully define culture on their own terms. In other words, students utilized their biographical narratives and their cultural repertoires to critically reflect their perception of self and “others”.

Moreover, it became apparent that students transformed the perception of diversity and lifeworld differences. Their biographical experiences shared in the group created a transformative field of dialogue, exchange, and interaction. In this context, students reflected on authentic life experiences and formed mutual relationships through multimodal intercultural communication and new learning. Young learners in this research proved that are eloquent discussants able to produce a common narrative culture in their respective learning community. The research findings are particularly important for preschool education as they demonstrate that educational practice should be informed by participatory ethos and experiential intercultural learning. Embracing students’ lifeworlds in a collective learning experience paves the way to discuss diversity and its multifaced manifestations in an authentic mode. In this way intercultural understanding over individual differences becomes a meaningful process that enhances transformation and self-realization. To this end, narratives constitute a powerful method which brings novel conceptualisations of diversity. Also, multimodal meaning making through dialogue and identity texts (group drawings) enhances meaningful leaning that supports the sense of belonging in the learning process. Overall, educational practice can be effective and inclusive when actively involves students in the production of authentic intercultural products such as collective intercultural encounters and multimodal literary drawings.

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