

Teaching Children's Literature to Future Teachers: From Theory to Practice.

Angela Yannicopoulou*
Professor of Children's Literature
National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens
aggianik@ecd.uoa.gr

Dimitris Politis**
Associate Professor of Children's
Literature and Theory of Literature
University of Patras
dimpolitis@upatras.gr

Introductory statements

Although Children's Literature studies would be regarded to date as highly advanced, nevertheless teaching of Children's Literature at a university level does not seem yet to be adequately researched (Kutzer, 1981; Hunt, 2005). The main reasons for the above ascertainments seem to be, on the one hand, the focus of the interest of scholars and researchers in the ontological issues of Children's Literature; on the other hand, it could be their justified obsession with theoretical issues, which have occupied over the years a rising area of literary production that seeking its own theoretical equipment and style. Without ignoring or downgrading the teaching suggestions as well as teaching efforts of its utilization in primary and secondary education for several decades,¹ the fact is that in universities similar efforts are usually exhausted either in simple curriculum preparation or in general declarations of theoretical principles away from practice. In addition, accredited there are massive differences worldwide concerning the institutes, departments, or syllabi of Children's Literature courses.

Thinking along the same frame of thoughts and questions, we also include in this context the case of Children's Literature in Greek Universities, whose regular teaching has a relatively short history, something in the order of thirty-

¹ Just to cite indicatively: Benton, M., & Fox, G. (1985). *Teaching Literature: Nine to Fourteen*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Benton, M., J. Teasey, R. Bell, and K. Hurst. (1988). *Young Readers Responding to Poems*. London: Routledge; Pieper, I. (2006). The Teaching of Literature. *Intergovernmental Conference: Languages of Schooling: towards a Framework for Europe* (Strasbourg, 16-18 October 2006)]. <https://rm.coe.int/16805c73e1>; Alsop, J. (2015). *A Case for Teaching Literature in the Secondary School Why Reading Fiction Matters in an Age of Scientific Objectivity and Standardization*. London: Routledge-Taylor & Francis Group; Lindell, I. (2020). Embracing the Risk of Teaching Literature. *Educational Theory*, 70(1), 43-55. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12405>.

five years. Besides, Children's Literature in Greece is confined exclusively to Primary and Preschool Education Departments, while in the Departments of Philology Children's Literature is always undervalued and, decidedly, not among the courses offered to undergraduate students.²

The main aim of this paper, which served as an extensive presentation at a conference focused on "Fostering Dialogue: Teaching Children's Literature at University", is to expound both theoretical and practical contribution to the is-



issues above by two collaborating Greek Departments: the Department of Early Childhood Education at National-Kapodistrian University of Athens, and the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education at the University of Patras.

Ultimately, in this paper we seek to explore and to display the ways, in which literature studies and theories are transformed into teaching practices within the context of a university course, and how students/future teachers flow back into the community, meaning to return what they learn to society, in order to put this knowledge into action.

Theorizing the issues of teaching

Although the issues with which we intersect in this paper have occupied the academic community for many decades, the fact that we are still debating them at the level of a university conference suggests the urgent need for both theoretical handling and practical treatment. From the 1960s and 1970s until today, key questions appear to be running and haunting the education of future teachers: *How are we going to convince our current students and prospective teachers of the value of offering literary texts to children? In what ways we will help them realize first their own relationship to literature and then their students' potential relationship to literary texts? How are we going to make more convincing and effective ways of moving from theoretical debate on this matter to "good*

² The reasons for this are many, but they are not present to be exposed and analysed as they deviate from the very intentions of this specific presentation.

practices” that will fill teachers and pupils with joy, offering them beyond prejudice and stereotypes the literary experience and reading enjoyment? On the



basis of all these issues and the questions that underlie them are always the theoretical considerations caused by practice but also the practices that need theoretical documentation. Since 1968, when Elliot D. Landau as

head of “Committee to Study the Teaching of Children’s Literature in Colleges and Universities” declares that is a necessity to “discern the state of the teaching of Children’s Literature in universities and colleges”, and to “strengthen” the teaching of Children’s Literature through various “materials and techniques” (Landau, 1968: v, 1-3), practical tips and research recommendations, to this day, when a variety of ways and renewed perspectives on a critical engagement with Children's Literature are presented.

It is perhaps no coincidence that most of the thoughts and suggestions on this subject, even if they do not always betray their theoretical/scientific origin, come from Literary Theories. Whereas in the past, however, mainly before the 1960s and 1970s, theorists talked mainly about “close” textual approaches, today the relevant issues are notably concerned with the act of reading, i.e. the actual or potential relationship of readers-students with literary texts and the experience they convey to their recipients. Such a shift of interest proves to be particularly useful in the education of future teachers, because it may remove them from the anchorages of older approaches, while projecting the special value of the literary experience for each individual reader orients them towards the respect of individual peculiarities and characteristics of students as individuals, their needs and preferences as readers and distinct personalities, that is, all those elements that they submitted during the reading event. Towards this direction, particularly illuminating is evidenced, most of the theoreticians deal with issue stress not only the exploratory character of literature as an experience, but also readers’ active role in the reading process, and their reciprocal, transactional/interactional, relation to the text (Rosenblatt, 1978; Iser, 1978). For

them, literature comes into being in the live circuit set up between the reader and the text. Specifically, L.M. Rosenblatt argues that through the medium of words, the text links every reader's consciousness "with certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes." During this procedure, "The reader brings to the work personality traits, memory of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition" (Rosenblatt, 1995: 30-31). In fact, all these elements along with many others may determine readers' personal compound with the textual contribution, in order that they could live through the literary experience. This recognition of readers' features as "mediators" in their response to a literary work, is indicative of Rosenblatt's theoretical orientation as well as of her transactional "philosophy" for viewing the dynamics of the reading process. The distinction between "text" and "poem" alongside the discrimination between the two "stances," meaning the ways of reading, that the reader is likely to adopt: the "efferent," or "nonaesthetic" reading, and the "aesthetic" one. By the "text" she means "the printed signs in their capacity to serve as symbols," while the "poem" presupposes a reader actively involved with a text and refers to what this reader makes of his/her responses to the particular set of verbal symbols." Furthermore, she considers the poem not as an "object, or an ideal entity," but as an "event in time" which "happens during a coming together" process, a "living through" experience, the transaction/interaction itself, which therefore implies that literature itself is constructed as an experience. In the "efferent", "nonaesthetic" or "instrumental," reading the reader is concerned only for what he/she "will carry away from the reading," such as particular information for specific purposes. On the contrary, in the "aesthetic reading" the reader is concerned with the reading event, and his/her "attention is focused on what he/she is living through during the reading-event" (Rosenblatt, 1978: 12-14, 22-47). This very "experience", identified with the reading itself, seems to be the touchstone of every teaching approach to literary texts, since, according to Wolfgang Iser (1978: 10), "the literary work is an effect to be experienced," not "an object to be defined".

The encounter of university students with such concepts, the understanding of the reading process, the awareness of the individuality of each reader but also the uniqueness of each reading can form a solid reference framework that

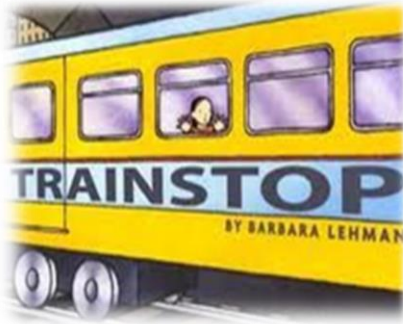
will help them to experience and, eventually, to disseminate the valuable literary experience.

It turns out that the key and the essence of the potential answers to the issues that concern us here lies precisely in the important functions of literary experience which can make the love for reading permanent. And if a literary experience is complete, it can be a sure basis for carrying out and implementing practices that greatly facilitate the processes of teaching literature. In the end, it seems that theory without practice and application is not convincing and shows arbitrariness, while practice far apart from theory is identified with just empiricism and is doomed to have no continuity.

The course: From theory to practice

Within the “expanding world” of Children’s Literature and literary studies, the cornerstone of the courses we present here is the deep theoretical framework of Children’s Literature, like the one we’re trying above to shape roughly with the help of theoretical principles like those mainly of Rosenblatt. In the Department of Early Childhood Education, at National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Children’s Literature courses include: “Introduction in Children’s Literature (compulsory)”, “Teaching of Literature”, “Ideology in Children’s Literature”, and “Picturebooks in Education.” In the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education, at the University of Patras, the courses offered are: “Children’s Literature (Theory) (compulsory)”, “Children’s Literature (History)”, “Literature in the Kindergarten”. From the courses mentioned above, two are of special interest: “Picturebooks in Education”, and “Literature in the Kindergarten”, both offered to future preschool teachers at the final undergraduate year. Being structured around three components from the “mantra”: enjoy, dig deeper, take action” (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2018: 1-3), a course connecting theory to practice is offered at the final semesters, 8th (Athens) and 7th (Patras) respectively, to future preschool teachers. During these specific courses students are asked to study thoroughly and also to comprehend deeper specific issues of Children’s Literature. Before that, however, they have to fulfill the requirements of the “mantra” mentioned just before: to enjoy reading, to read critically, and to use what they acquire get down in life (Leland et al., 2018: 1-3).

Having preceded the other courses with the help of which the students have



become acquainted with the terminology and the “poetics” of Children's Literature, they could deal with specific literary topics (e.g. wordless picturebooks). In addition,

they become familiar with children's books that circulate not only in Greece, but also abroad in virtue of some ascertainments and “tips”.



As students come to know more and more quality children's books, we expect them to develop a passion for books that “seems to be contagious” (Gebhard, 2006: 454-455). Furthermore, Children's



Literature researchers provide substantial evidence of the positive effects of a teacher's reading behaviors on students' reading practices (Dreher, 2002-2003; Kolloff, 2002; Layne, 2009; Worthy, 2002; Applegate & Applegate,

2004). We have also observed that crossover picturebooks are an effective starting point for transforming university students, who are themselves reluctant readers, into avid readers.

With theory in mind and valuable practice in our goals, university students become informed about children's books by: visiting national and regional children's libraries and making reading lists concerning different issues (e.g. metafictional wordless picturebooks); by interviewing librarians and book editors; by meeting authors and illustrators; by discussing about children's books in book circles (Cantrell 2002); by reviewing books and publishing their reviews, mainly online.



During the course students are also engaged in creative writing. Apart from this, workshops are also held for university students mainly concerning the materiality of the book. In addition, university students are asked to organize literary events based on specific children's books (e.g. accordion books), mainly in schools. It is very important for students to be involved in enjoyable activities with children's books (Pike 2017), in order to connect literature with pleasure.

What kind of events do they organize and perform? Very often book read-



ing in kindergartens, Reading clubs (Clubs of Reading, Books Circles) in the kindergartens, Book reading in libraries and museums, book festivals (such as "Spot the dot: Picturebooks on great painters"), Children's Festival every year. Generally speaking, they search for enjoyable activities. Furthermore, students

create educational material connected to book-reading (e.g. book sharing with



preschoolers). They also create Board games and Puzzles based on books. Last but not least, at the end of the semester, students undertake the task to distribute their experience

by organizing conferences on specific topics, which they worked on during the semester, by publishing online and offering open courses online to the public, by adding photographs of their own book reading and activities.³



Besides, apart from acquiring new skills during all these processes, university students are encouraged to flow back into the community and to serve efficiently the paramount objective of the university courses: A University open to the society!

Obviously and after all...

Since theory is related to what we do in our real lives as human beings, to our practices, we obviously encourage a transition from theory to practice! Although the theoretical principles that guide us in our efforts to effectively teach Children's Literature to university students are not always obvious, or are not explicitly mentioned in the implementation of relevant activities, theoretical reflection dictates and supports our every action. Before they get into practice, students go through almost all the “paths” of theory, not to become theorists but to name their practices and to realize their dynamics.

In virtue of all these practices future teachers are trained in teaching literature to preschoolers we are convinced that they become gradually not only

³ See more details and ideas for similar activities in: Leland et al., 2018.

“book people” and “child people” (Townsend, 1990), but also let us say “children’s books people” who could cultivate a life-lasting love for reading, a priceless custom for themselves and for their students.

*Angela Yannicopoulou is a Professor of Children’s Literature at the Department of Preschool Education at National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece. She is interested in visual literacy, teaching of children’s literature, ideology and mainly in the study of picturebooks, as a multimodal genre. She has published many papers and books: *Aesopic Fables and Children: Form and Function* (Liverpool: Manutius Press, 1993, in English), *Contemporary Picturebooks* (Papadopoulos, 2008, in Greek), *Picturebooks in Preschool Education* (Patakis, 2016, in Greek).

** Dimitri(o)s Politis is an Associate Professor of Children’s Literature and Theory of Literature at the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education at University of Patras, Greece. A co-author of the book *Children’s Ideas about Children’s Literature* (Topos, 2010) (in Greek), he has also edited: *Literary Book and School* (Papadopoulos, 2008) and *Modern Adolescent Literature* (in collaboration with Professor Meni Kanatsouli, Patakis, 2011) (both in Greek). His research interests are focused on Children’s Literature as well as on Theory and Teaching of Literature, while he has published several articles on various aspects of these topics.

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