

A School creates its own Library: A Case Study

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The main objective of this paper is to present, through a case study, the specific conditions according to which a school library can be founded, developed and can operate in a Greek public elementary school and which ensued from the collaboration between parents and teachers belonging to different educational grades in an indifferent or negative educational and social environment.

case study; school library development; school curriculum enhancement

Introduction

The Framework

This paper presents, through a case study, the special conditions needed for the foundation, development and operation of a school library, which were met exclusively through the collaboration between teachers of different grades and parents. The study concerns the library of a Greek elementary school, situated in an educationally degraded area of the broader district of Thessaloniki, within an indifferent, or rather negative educational and social environment.

During the past few years, the Greek government has been attempting a radical school reform, since the Greek educational system appears to be somehow outdated. The attempted reforms encourage mainly the implementation of educational approaches that are based on the active participation of students and on co-operative forms of teaching in the classroom while, at the same time, lay emphasis on approaching knowledge through the utilization of the school library and laboratories (Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs, Pedagogical Institute, 2003).

Despite the fact that these reforms are legislatively related to the actual existence and utilization of the school library and that the respective legislative regulations can be traced back to 1835, the government has not founded a single library in elementary schools up until today –except for a few cases whose foundation was financed by the European Union! In practice, the foundation of a library depends solely on each school’s resources. This is mainly due to “the lack of an integrated policy concerning the role of the library in education and learning in our country¹” and because of the fact that the school library was never organically related to the educational process (Arvaniti, I. K., 2005, 2008).

The dynamics developed within the educational sphere counter the ascertained inertness and indifference of the institutional and social environment towards the school, in the frame of a procedure that Chombart de Lauwe described as “dynamique culturelle” (Chombart de Lauwe, 1982). In the case of the library examined in the present paper, this procedure was set forward by Ioanna Arvaniti, member of the researchers’ team and school councillor in the area where the particular school is situated, who organized a pilot program with the objective of upgrading the role of the library in the schools that fall under her jurisdiction.

The implementation of the program started out during the school year 2003-04 with a triple objective:

the upgrade of the few already existing libraries

the foundation of new, modern libraries, in every school that retained an available classroom and had ensured the teachers’ consent

the functional incorporation of school libraries in the daily educational process

For the materialization of the program, the school councillor worked, at local level, towards the establishment of a wider consent concerning the importance of school libraries. Out of all the local authorities, the ones that finally supported the program were volunteer educators from schools of the region. These educators, having comprehended the position that the school library should hold in the contemporary school, founded and started to operate libraries, central or classroom-based, in all 23 schools of the district, despite the minimal means available.

The field of research

This was the frame within which the library of the 18th Elementary School in the Municipality of Stavroupoli (in the broader district of Thessaloniki) was developed. The particular school constitutes the subject of the present paper both because it comprises the most distinctive example of the potentials and limitations of the dynamics molded in local level for the library’s foundation and because the library was, in fact, structured in accordance with modern pedagogical and architectural specifications.

The school is situated in a developing area, destined for the reception of economic refugees, which has neither a public library nor a cultural centre. Thanks to the teachers’

¹ Quoted by Gerasimos Arsenis, Minister of Education in 1997, during his salutation on the two-day meeting concerning: “The library and the book in education” (Athens, 13-14 May 1997).

initiative and the collaboration of the parents association, the school had a library in a separate room, which contained 3,500 volumes and functioned only as a lending library since 1996. The intervention started during the school year 2005-06 and included the following stages:

- co-operation with the head-master and the school teachers for the materialization of the intervention
- open dialogue with the parents to elicit their support for the intervention
- the reformation of the existent library in accordance with the modern pedagogical directions from the member of the team of researchers, professor Dimitris Germanos, who specializes in the reformation of school areas so as to meet standard pedagogical and architectural standards
- teacher training on the organization and operation of a modern school library
- monitoring and support the operation of the new library starting from the school year 2005-06.

The intervention took on two separate directions:

- The functional and aesthetic recreation of the room (50m²). The room was organized in separate areas, its flexibility being its main characteristic, so as to accommodate alternately different forms of communication and interaction between children allowing them to take action individually, in small groups or in a single group-class. The aesthetic intervention intended to create a friendly and familiar atmosphere, which contributes greatly to the development of a positive psychological mood and to the children's aesthetic refinement (Germanos, D., 2006a).
- The pedagogical utilization of the room, its equipment and its collection. The library's collection was enriched so that it would be able to meet the requirements of a modern educational environment.

As a result, the library was transformed from a simple room for book accommodation and lending, into a modern educational environment, with a collection of 4,500 book titles pertaining to all main categories of the Dewey decimal system for children's libraries (about 2,000 are literary books), audiovisual-electronic equipment and internet connection. It is operated by two educators-supervisors.

Objectives and operational patterns for the library of the research

The objectives set during the stage of the library's design were:

- the refinement of the relationship between the child and the book
- the expansion of the child's general interests
- the support of the syllabus
- the pupils' familiarization with all information resources
- the organization of modern educational and cultural activities to take place in the library.

The objectives also defined the library's expected operational patterns as a:
lending library

- study-hall
- broad-alternative form of classroom
- place for educational and cultural events.

Theoretical Background

The present research directed its attention to the interdependence of certain basic parameters which establish the library's function as an educational environment. Without exhausting the width of the research field, these selected parameters consist of: a) the educational framework of the library's operation, b) the space, as a physical parameter of the particular educational environment, and c) the effect of the library on children-readers. This is why the approach is cross-scientific; it correlates issues of a) pedagogy, b) organization of space -in accordance with pedagogical, psychosocial and architectural principles- and, c) the theory of reading, stressing mainly its implementation in the reading of literary books.

Modern pedagogical approaches underline the importance of an enriched educational environment which will support the implementation of teaching and learning methods that are centered on the child and his/her own creative development. This importance lies mainly in the potential for active approach to knowledge, development of dialogue and pedagogical interaction as well as in its appropriately organized space, which, in its layout and aesthetics, will promote the innovative pedagogical aspect of the educational environment.

This framework highlights the vital role of the modern school library which incorporates the following (IFLA/ UNESCO, 1999):

- the requirements of the physical environment (spatial organization, appropriate means, furnishing and equipment) for the implementation of cooperative forms of learning, individual study and group discussion
- a rich and varied collection of information resources in printed and electronic forms that would also cover the wide field of the student's interests so as to offer him/her the opportunity of studying them in depth and extend them and, also, to motivate him/her to visit the library.

Under these circumstances, the student may gradually construct his/her own knowledge and prepare himself/herself for the quest of lifelong learning. According to O.E.C.D.'s report "lifelong learning is not synonymous with adult education. It starts from the early years, since our first 4-5 years constitute the period of faster development" (Tsaousis, D., 1998). The pedagogical utilization of the school library reinforces the school's general potential for developing a fondness of reading, given that the pre-school and school ages are most convenient for laying the foundations of the lifelong relationship between the child and the book and of gaining pleasure from reading (Spink, J., 1989, Morrow, L. M., 1983, Greaney, V., 1980, Anagnostopoulos, V. D., 1987, Poslaniek, K., 1991).

In order for the student to benefit from these potentials, the school library must be integrated into the daily school routine. Its successful operation is associated with activities that transform it into a powerful and multifunctional educational environment (McGhee, Marla W. and Jansen, B. A, Arvaniti, I. K, 2006, 2008).

On the other hand, the research has shown that space must be considered as a physical reality with anthropocentric quality, much more complex than the frame defined by its geometrical and technical characteristics (Canter, D. & Stringer, P., 1976). Space retains a psychological dimension because, as a physical reality, it is psychologically constructed, on the basis of the interaction between the individual's characteristics and the characteristics of the environment. Parallel to that, it also possesses a social dimension, since the utilization of space by the subject is directly related to social values and norms which influence the

development of the subject's behavior. It is an interactive relationship, because the subject internalizes the environmental influences according to his/her own criteria and values, which are developed through his/her own personal experiences and also through his/her interaction with others (Fischer, G. N., 1997). This process is of great pedagogical importance. On one hand, the information provided in the library can be considered as a possible knowledge stimulus and, on the other, the potential for interaction with the social and physical environment leads to skills acquisition and to the development of different forms of behavior (Germanos, D., 1995 & 2006).

The framework presented acquires special importance when it comes to childhood, because space forms the physical basis of a complex process of breeding. The pedagogical quality of the library's settings creates the conditions in which the child can learn and develop, through adopted practices and experiences he/she obtains from the physical surroundings. The wealth and complexity of the stimuli, together with the multiplicity of potentials for developmental activities that the place has to offer to the child acquire special significance (Weinstein, C. S., David, T. G., 1987, Germanos, D., 2006).

Within the educational environment, space holds the important role of supporting and enhancing the educational process (Mazalto, M., 2007). Special studies on the issue of the school library setting, relate it to the quality of the knowledge acquired by children during the reading of books by educators (Morrow L.M., & Rand, M., 1991), and to the number and frequency of the children's visits to the library (Morrow & Weinstein, C., 1986). The principles of spatial organization in a modern library should be based upon pedagogical and architectural criteria and should follow the general organizational directions of the school: categorization in areas on the basis of the desired forms of interaction and communication, flexibility and creation of a familiar atmosphere in the educational environment (Dudek, M., 2000, Germanos, D., 2006).

Finally, the school library is inevitably related to the literary book (and this also applies to the case of the library examined in the research), since the greatest part of its collection consists of literary books. Moreover, the integration of children's literature, since 2003, in the syllabus of Greek elementary schools as a discrete and autonomous entity within the linguistic course and the inter-thematic approach to knowledge, impose the polysemous function of the library on the whole spectrum of the educational process. Due to literature's emotional, dialogical and multilayered character, its objectives are not limited to its relation with the thematic of a particular teaching unit or its utilization in the approximation of other subject matters but, go one step further towards the involvement of student-readers in the social and cultural experience of reading. The school library contributes greatly to this practice because in this way the students gain access to a great amount of books and the opportunity to familiarize themselves with its use in order to search for the books that interest them most.

Certainly, the distinction between a literary book and a knowledge book is often difficult, with a tendency towards the subjective interpretation of the criteria that distinguish one genre from another, since several characteristics and objectives pass from one onto the other. Thus, the focus should be placed upon the relationship being developed between the reader and the book, irrespective of the kind of book he/she is reading. This relationship gives rise to several questions concerning the role of the child-reader, the procedures and reading strategies being developed due to the particularity of its age, the nature of the texts being chosen by the child and the objectives of reading (Ascenzi 2003). Rosenblatt (1994, 1995), with her "transactional theory" (1978), acknowledges the unique, personal and dynamic relationship between the reader and his/her reading, which is characterized by the constant interaction between the reader and the text. During the act of reading, the reader relates the text to his/her experiences, reevaluates opinions, extends his/her ideas and constructs the

textual points transferring his/her expectations onto them through “aesthetic reading”. He/she is also given the choice of non-aesthetic, or “efferent reading” if he/she is only interested in gathering specific information, or may choose to combine both kinds of reading.

Rosenblatt’s theory, which, as consequent studies reveal (Applebee 1978, Benton 1996), laid the foundations for the reformation of the basic conception that was gradually developed in the classrooms, will support our research as far as issues of reading trends, choices and practices related to the operation of the school library of the research are concerned.

Methodology

After two and a half years of the library’s operation in accordance with the new standards, the present research attempts a first assessment of the intervention, on the basis of the following questions:

- Which are the basic operational forms of the library as an educational environment?
- How great is its influence on the students’ reading behavior?
- How much does it generally affect children?
- In which degree are the primary goals of the library met?

The research took place in December 2008 and the sample included all students of the school’s 4th, 5th and 6th grades who visited and used the library within a week (135 students, 78 girls and 57 boys) and the two educators-administrators of the library. The students of the sample visited the library both before and after its upgrading intervention.

The research was based on three hypotheses:

- The library’s educational function influences the students’ reading habits, despite the fact that they happen to live in a social and institutional environment that appears to be inactive and indifferent towards such issues
- If the school library functions as an educational environment (and not simply as a lending library) it will contribute to the children’s development towards becoming conscious and active readers
- The specific characteristics of the setting promote the library’s educational function and contribute to the development of a positive psychological mood.

The principle of triangulation was applied during the stage of data selection and the following research tools were used:

- Interview guide for the recording of the library’s administrators opinions,
- Method for recording the rate of book lending (in cooperation with the librarians)
- Questionnaire for the recording of students’ opinions, which included a combination of multiple choice questions and semi-open, semi-directed questions.

A qualitative method with a thematic content analysis was used for processing the data.

Research Findings

Question 1: The question “why did you choose this book?” aimed at the detection of the students’ reading preferences. The processing of answers revealed that students from all the

classes included in the sample choose primarily on the basis of the content and less often on the basis of the book's bibliological elements (table 1).

Table 1

Grade	Criterion for choice (%)			Total (%)
	Content	Bibliological Elements	Other	
6th	60,3	34,9	4,8	100
5th	91,7	8,3	-	100
4th	71,7	26,7	1,6	100

In all three grades of the sample, the choice of books based on its content is shared between knowledge and literary books while the other categories have insignificant presence, if any (table 2).

Table 2

Grade	Choice based on content (%)			Total (%)
	Literature	Knowledge Books	Other	
6th	58	42	-	100
5th	41,8	47,3	10,9	100
4th	46,5	53,5	-	100

As far as the choice of literary books is concerned, the dominant preference in all three grades is towards adventure and mystery books. This preference is consolidated according to age, with an evident increase of the percentage from the 4th to the 5th grade, while there is no obvious differentiation according to sex. Humor does not have an important say on their reports, contradicting the claims of international bibliography.

Children choose a book based on distinct and specialized preferences, as shown in the justification of their particular choice. Their preferences are mainly related to aesthetic pleasure both in literary and knowledge books. These data reveal that students of all three classes make their conscious choices in their school library.

The combination of the findings from question 1 shows that students of all three grades have already developed the attitude of an informed reader, with specific orientation of choices.

Questions 2 & 3: These questions explore the social dimension that the children-readers attach to the task of reading, since they discuss and share the experiences derived from the books they read. Their reports show that most children discuss about the books with members of their families (41% of the total of reports), a smaller percentage with their friends (30,3%) and an even smaller percentage discuss with their educators (28,7%) (table 3).

Table 3

Grade	"I am discussing about the books I read" with... N (%)						Grand Total N (%)
	friends	educators		family			
		Teacher of the class	Library's Administrator	parents	children ²	relatives ³	
6th	30	13	6	16	5	1	71 (29,1)

² "Children" refers to brothers, sisters and cousins.

³ "Relatives" refers to grandparents, uncles, aunts, and godfather/godmother.

5th	20	14	5	25	6	2	72 (29,5)
4th	24	18	14	27	11	7	101 (41,4)
Sum Total	74/244 (30,3)	45/244 (18,4)	25/244 (10,3)	68/244 (27,9)	22/244 (9)	10/244 (4,1)	244 (100)

The main reason prompting children to discuss their readings is their desire to share their experiences and exchange information, broadening their reading scope -after having actually finished reading- and enhancing their reading experience.

Question 4: Question 4 provides us with information concerning their reading preferences and its findings are related to those of question 1. Children choose books of specialized interest, which can be organized –with almost equivalent representation of their preferences- within the categories of a) literary, b) magazines and comics and, c) encyclopedic, which can be extended to many subcategories (such as sports, constructions, history, cultural morals), indicating that children actually take informed decisions. The basic motive underlining their choice is aesthetic pleasure (82,5%), while the rest of the children do not proceed to an “aesthetic” but an “efferent” reading, their main objective being –according to their reports- the deduction of encyclopedic knowledge and information that would enrich their school projects. Here, however, the obvious objective is the improvement of their student performance and the recognition of their knowledge. It is worth noting that they relate “aesthetic reading” to knowledge books, fact that registers a higher level of communication and response to their readings.

Question 5: The children’s answers to the question “what would you like to do in the school library and why? », reveal their relationship both with the educational process and with the actual space of the library. The overall figure of the children’s answers to this question is portrayed in table 4.

The reports are classified under three basic categories. The first one, which concentrates most of the reports (41, 7% of the total), shows that children consider their library a study-hall , where activities that combine children’s initiative – such as “choose”/ “search”/ “read” and not only “borrow”- can be developed.

This highlights the significance of the role of the librarians, who urge children to engage themselves in such actions and who help them develop a reader’s culture. The “administrative” aspect of its function, which is related to “lending”, is almost absent since children are urged to search, choose, read, and, of course they prefer such actions that are connected with initiatives and which bring them closer to their interests.

In the second thematic category, children think that their library could function as a broad classroom, as a modern educational environment for a smooth class which would be based on discussion and which, in a way, would be associated with pleasure. The statements in the thematic category “I am having a good time” in the library also fall under this category (table 4).

Table 4

Grade	Thematic categories of reports					Total
	Library – Study-hall	Library – Broad Classroom	Positive relationship with the place	“I am having a good time”	More open	
4th	45	18	41	19	3	126
5th	59	18	35	5		117
6th	37	19	39	-	-	95

Total	141 /41,7%	55 /16,3%	115 /34%	24 /7,1	3 /0,9%	338 /100%
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References to the library as a form of a broader classroom are unevenly distributed, because they appear in some grades and are absent from others (table 5).

Categories (%)								
6/A	6/B	6/3	5/A	5/B	5/C	4/A	4/B	4/C
0,85	30,9	0,8	42,9	0	0	32,1	0	0

Finally, the third thematic category concerns the children's relationship with the settings of their school library. Children highlight their positive attitude towards the place, which is often related to the parameter of "pleasure". When the place is associated with its educational function as a study-hall, it is viewed as a familiar and friendly study environment, while when it is associated with the form of a broadened classroom it is considered as a quiet and enjoyable teaching environment. In both cases, space is related to the students' active participation in the educational process, because it is connected with his/her autonomous actions and depends on his/her own initiative. Only in one of the nine classes of the sample the place appears as a neutral environment (there are no emotional indicators) which children visit to borrow books and study.

Interviews with the librarians

The findings of the students' questionnaires analysis are verified and interpreted by those of the two librarians' interviews. According to those, all children visit the library at least once a week, on a schedule basis, and even more often on their own initiative. The voluntary arrival of students in the library is gradually increased over the years. The library operates in a systematic way both as a lending library that is related to study-hall activities and, in a smaller degree, as a place for conducting courses that are highly demanding as far as information research and the use of resources are concerned. The limitations imposed by the school syllabus and the educators' lack of experience did not allow for the extension of the library's functions to the organization of educational and cultural events.

The librarians have noted that children have already developed certain reading preferences, which can be differentiated according to their age. They have also noted that borrowing is most often based on the criterion of the "aesthetic pleasure".

The positive relationship between children and the settings of the library seems to be of great significance. According to the librarians, the place is very pleasant and children like it so much that they tend to visit in every possible occasion, even during their breaks or in cases when they are not interested in borrowing books or studying but simply want to be there alone or in the company of friends. The supervisors assume that if children had more spare time they would definitely come to the library more often. Students abide by the library's rules and take good care of the place; as a result, the library looks brand new, despite the fact that it has already been 2, 5 years since its inauguration in its new form.

Discussion

The present case study constitutes a kind of “curriculum vitae” of a school library, which was upgraded and continues to operate and develop based solely upon the school unit’s resources and upon a small group of educators who voluntarily supported its mission and existence.

The question “which are the educational characteristics of such a library that exists in a “friendly indifferent” social and institutional environment”, is very interesting. The research has shown that the particular library functions in a complex and multilayered pedagogical form; it functions: a) as a lending library, b) as a study-hall, a place for study and discussions focusing on the content and the messages contained in the books of the collection, and c) as a broad form of classroom in an educational process that emphasizes on the research and utilization of the collection’s resources and the internet access which are available at the library. This complex form of function is based on the interdependence of its three distinct levels: thus, starting from the point of book-borrowing (1st level), there is a progress towards reading activities, discussions and writing tasks which may be directed by the educator or be a result of students’ spontaneity (2nd level); these activities, by turn, create the conditions (especially the familiarization with the collection and with the principles of research and information use) for the library’s operation as a broader classroom (3rd level).

The specific library’s function is interwoven with the active role of the student: the overwhelming majority of the sample’s reports are directed towards the tasks of “searching”, “choosing”, and “reading”, combined with “discussing”; they are directed, therefore, to activities that are related with the development of initiatives and interaction as well as with the children’s decision making . On the contrary the act of “borrowing”, which, according to the reports, constitutes a standard procedure, is rarely viewed as an element of the library. This results to an educational framework for the function of the library which is directly related to the child’s positive attitude towards the place. This relationship depends on two factors: a) the spatial arrangement, which, with its particular form facilitates the development of alternative forms of communication and educational interaction in the library and, b) the aesthetics of the particular place, factor which seems to contribute to the formation of a positive psychological mood. Both the children and the librarians stress the importance of the comfort and beauty of the place as well as the sense of pleasure and the familiar atmosphere that it creates, offering thus a series of positive spatial conditions for the educational procedures. It seems that the place is transforming into a factor of well-being for the children visiting the library. Which are, however, the effects of the pedagogical framework and the educational process on the children-readers? The findings analysis has shown that children are in a position to choose books having already set their minds on whatever interests them.

Their criteria are related mainly to the thematic and the content of the book and less with textual elements. Moreover, their choices (i.e. their interests) are spread around a wide variety of thematic categories available in the library’s collection. It seems that the potentials offered by the collection are better utilized with the library’s function as an educational environment. Finally, children attach a social dimension to reading, thing that helps them enrich their reading experiences. The combination of data drives us to the discovery that the educational features and the library’s function have contributed to the development of a reading awareness and to extend the scope of the children’s reading interests, which are related both to the general interests of each individual and to the contents of the school’s syllabus. Thus, the two basic objectives for the creation of this library (to support the student

–appeal to his/her interests, extend their scope and familiarize them with the existence and use of information resources- and the syllabus –cover the greatest possible range of the applied cognitive subjects) was actually achieved. The degree of the particular library’s positive effect as an educational environment can be deduced also from the fact that visiting the library and reading constitute a part of the children’s interests.

These findings feature the importance of the librarians’ role. Given the social and institutional environment’s indifference, and also the rather low educational level of the families, the children’s active attitude towards their relationship with the access to the collection and their reading awareness are mainly due to the two educators’ actions. These librarians-educators do not simply provide children with information regarding the collection but go one step further to urge them to search, consider and discuss while, at the same time, secure the appropriate conditions needed for the activities in the library. Parallel to that, findings highlight the importance of the educators who connected the library with their classroom activities. Three out of the nine educators who took part in the research have extended the educational process to the library, utilizing it as a form of broader classroom. In all three cases, their choice seems to boost the students’ interest for in-class participation and to contribute to the development of the attitude of an informed reader and aware student. On the contrary, this does not apply to other classes, whose teachers maintain a conventional relationship with the library.

On the other hand, the limited utilization of the library for educational and cultural events reveals the limits of the educators’ capabilities. This is mainly due to the restricted role of the teachers and the lack of the respective training.

These findings reveal that the primary goals have been achieved –at least a great part of them. The most important deduction, though, is that the particular school library became autonomous in an indifferent social and institutional setting and was able to survive as an educational environment with developmental characteristics, because of its potential to surpass any obstacle blocking its way. This transcendence is based, in great part, on the utilization of human resources and this is why the next step of the research team will be the preparation of a focused training program for the educators of the particular school.

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Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author(s) alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others are referenced.