



## CULTIVATING CRITICAL READERS THROUGH LITERARY-BASED STRUCTURED PROGRAMS AND INSTRUCTION

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### **Abstract:**

The love for reading (philanagnosia) is established from the early years of a child and contributes to his cognitive, linguistic, emotional and social development. The contact of a child with books is of crucial significance if we want to cultivate a critical reader and a future active citizen. This study examines the results of implementation of literary-based structured program and instruction in a sample of 450 students. The teacher's contribution is significant as s/he is the one who mediates between students and text, selecting each time the appropriate technique / strategy to lead the students into a critical approach of it and a constructive discussion. This paper presents a survey that was carried out in schools in the prefecture of Chania (Crete) in Greece and aimed at investigating the effects of structured literary-based program and its impact on children's response as critical readers.

**Keywords:** literary-based program, structured instruction, cultivation of reading attitude

### **1. Introduction**

Reading is a skill of indisputable value of our culture for the acquisition of knowledge, the cultivation of critical thinking, the improvement of quality of life and the socialization of human beings. It is an undeniable right of all citizens and every state has the obligation to provide it in every way and means (through education system, libraries, etc.) (Alderson, 2000).

The child's contact with reading starts from the very early age when parents read books and stories just before bedtime. This practice makes children engaged readers and contributes to the cultivation of philanagnosia, the acquisition of reading skills and the development of multiple literacies (linguistic, social, etc.). In addition, if a book has

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narrative and creative illustration, interest, humor and refers to sensitive aspects that worry a child, then, this contact with the book offers not only reading pleasure but also contributes holistically to children's development (linguistic development, social maturity, aesthetic cultivation, cultural values, development of creative thinking, e.t.c.).

## **2. The importance of Philanagnosia to the development of a child**

Philanagnosia refers to the love of reading. It is a targeted term that identifies a wide range of meanings, actions and values associated with the multi-level relationship between child - book and is cultivated gradually, methodically and systematically. Penak (2000: 13) characteristically supports that *"the verb read does not take imperative"*. In his book, he describes how the relationship between the reader and the book must be in order for reading response to be achieved. According to Penak, the child's contact with a book should be based on the verb "love" and "dream", because reading a book is a personal journey of interior search of ourselves, with no obligation or enforcement. At the time of reading, the reader is exposed to another world, persons and cultures, recognizing himself as part of a palimpsest and may better understand himself and others. Proust said that *"the reader, when he reads, is a reader of himself"*. The special relationship of the child with reading determines his future course as an active, engaged and critical reader.

Therefore, reading a child's book is a dynamic and complex act (Kalogirou, 2009: 70) that gives meaning to our world (Spink, 1990), entertains us, liberates us, allows us to escape with the imagination from the narrow limits of reality, educates us in an indirect and invisible way. In other words, reading a book is an act of knowledge and creation, an active process.

The purpose of reading for young children is to be acquainted contact with the act of reading, to establish gradually a friendly relationship with the literary book. This relationship will help them to develop their critical and creative thinking, to activate their imagination and creativity, to enrich their aesthetics, to test their emotions, developing their emotional intelligence and personality. Moreover, it contributes to cultivating their language and developing reading comprehension.

Most important, great pedagogical goals are achieved by reading literary books, such as:

- Cultivation of reading pleasure and aesthetic reception.
- Reader practice the skill of attentive listening and therefore prevention of distractions, when not due to pathogenic causes, which is very common in the early classes of primary school.
- Development of the skill of retelling stories and recognition of emotions or situations.
- Development of text comprehension.
- Development of collaborative and communication skills.
- Development of narrative ability.
- Students obtain familiarity with group operation.

- Creation of a climate of camaraderie and creativity in the classroom, which is transformed into a "community of readers".

Consequently, there are many pedagogical benefits in reading a literary book in class. For this reason, Children's Literature and children's books must be established in the field of education. In general, the child's contact with a book should be systematic in the educational practice, as this creates motivation and lays the foundation for a fruitful reflection that will meet student's interests and will aim at a variety of approaches. (Apostolidou, 2004). The connection of the various cognitive objects and lessons with a literary book brings to the fore the various emotional and social experiences that children carry on and off the school premises.

### **3. The didactic utilization of literary children books in class**

Reading children books of different kind according to children interests contributes to their development in many ways : ameliorate their language, oral and written, reinforce their memory, cultivate empathy and values (such as friendship, honesty, courage, freedom, humanism) and empower children to manage feelings and difficulties such as divorce or death of a loved person. Education's mission is not only to transfer knowledge but also values and social skills in order for our children to become active, sensitive, literate, cultivated citizen with morals and critical mind in the future.

Therefore, the teacher has an important role to play. If s/he manages to mediate in order to motivate, awaken and indulge the souls of children, then s/he has secured the first step for the cultivation of their aesthetic experience and cultural education. And because reading is the ticket to a journey into the world of fiction and fantasy, where the reader comes in contact with inner aspects of himself, we understand how important it is to bring children in contact with reading and cultivate to them the love for the book.

In schools philanagnosia is achieved, when the teacher manages to cultivate in children motivation and impulse them, making them realize that the subjects of a literary book concern life itself. The selection of appropriate books and the attractive way in which the stories are presented (style, methods, etc.) play an important role to the cultivation of philanagnosia. It is important to take into account the developmental level of the students and utilize their experiences and interests, so that the discussion which follows after reading a book, will activate the embedded social and cultural experiences, which is the basis for the reading-interpretive approach of the texts and the construction of the meaning (Anagnostopoulou, 2002; Holland, 1975: 113-4). In addition, it is important for a teacher to choose the way in which s/he will instill the love for reading, through playful activities, strategies and active techniques, with the contribution of other arts (Artzanidou, Goulis, Grosdos and Karakitsios, 2011; Barthes 2007; Brasseur, 2003). The teacher is the one who can record through animating, playful activities and processes the need and desire for reading that will lead to enjoyment, *methexis*, creativity, understanding the world and themselves, and create reader's communities (Papadatos, 2014).

#### 4. Purpose

The purpose of this study was the implementation of a literary-based intervention program that was based on the Rosenblatt's transactional theory (1978/1994) in order to increase reading in classes by utilizing literary children books and cultivate critical reading.

Literacy-based programs implemented in schools aim to create a community of readers with important skills, such as taking initiatives, developing dialogue, cultivating a critical spirit, active citizenship. Such a "community" is dominated by responsibility, team spirit, creativity, enthusiasm, diversity in ways and style of reading, independence and autonomy, cooperation in activities. The aim is primarily to create, as Spink (1990) said "*a nation of readers*," to multiply the motivation to read, to spread the love for the book, as the means that opens multiple windows to the mind and soul of the reader. To achieve this, we implemented a structured program based on the children's literary book that allowed the book-reader-author interaction according to Rosenblatt's transactional theory in a creative way. Structured reading programs encourage children to reconstruct the meaning of the texts through appropriate questions of the teacher so that all aspects of it are illuminated, important topics are discussed, ideologically charged passages are identified, alternative and multiple perspectives are expressed. In this way, children are educated shifting from the expressive to the implicit of the text, in its interpretive meaning and in its hidden points.

#### 5. Methodology

The intervention program was implemented in primary school classes in Chania, Crete, Greece. Our sample consisted of 25 teachers and 450 children (232 girls and 218 boys) aged 9 to 12.

At first, the teachers were informed about the philosophy of the program and then they were trained in basic theories, teaching proposals and the application of modern techniques and strategies in the use of books. The program included distance education (theoretical part) and practical-experiential workshops. Each month, one or two training sessions were held, where the teachers were trained on a specific topic with activities and alternative techniques by a writer or literacy specialist, and then they applied all the knowledge in their classroom. Part of our program was the reflective discussion in each meeting about the progress of the program, for feedback or enrichment / redefinition of actions in order to achieve student's response. We also utilize the *critical friend* in classrooms, a person who observes the whole procedure taking notes in a diary, without participating in it.

We utilize children's literature books with topics mainly concerned interpersonal relationships (family, school, friendships, etc.), social issues and universal issues and problems (peace-war, environment, diversity, rights, etc.) as we addressed at third till

sixth grade, where these themes and problematic is of major concern. Teachers read two books per week dedicating time for discussion and playful activities.

The training program of teachers was structured in the following axes:

- Teacher education: the value of literature and children's books in cultivating children skills;
- Theories and didactic experiential techniques;
- Creating our library;
- Literature circles/readers communities;
- Engaged readers: Building the network of philanagnosia;
- The role of parents in engaging reading;
- Children-readers: creating the critical readers;
- The relationship between multiple literacy and literature;
- Utilization of arts and ICT.

As far as the students are concerned, we evaluate student's response to read literary books at first by asking children to fill in a questionnaire. Then we also evaluate their ability in narrative texts (all students wrote two narrative texts before and two after the intervention program and we take the mean of the two evaluations trying to capture children's actual skills and abilities). Student's ability to write narrative text at the pre and post test phase was assessed with the Index of Narrative Complexity story coding form by Petersen, Gillam, & Gillam (2008), which concern narrative structure: (title, setting, theme, plan, reactions, actions, complications, consequences, end, sequence) and a series of qualitative data that related to the character development (plans, reactions, thoughts), the use of character's dialogues (Curenton & Lucas, 2007) and the narrator's evaluations. We added the assessment of the coherence of a (n) oral/ written text and the vocabulary. We also examined a) student's motivation to get involved in reading, b) student's behavior during reading and discussing a book. During the intervention, we also utilized the critical friend in classrooms, a person who observed the whole procedure taking notes in a diary (the researcher). The intervention program lasted a school year (9 months in total).

## 6. Research questions

This study attempted to answer five research questions:

- Did the teachers promote and in what extend reading in class?
- How teachers motivate children to read literacy books?
- Had the program significantly affected and to what extent on student's reading attitude?
- Did the program affect student's language development?
- Did children become more critical readers?

## 7. Results of program

The researcher using the above methodological instruments collected the required data and analyzed it in order to investigate teachers and children's attitude/response in reading literary books in class. Quantity and quality data were collected and analyzed.

At first, we investigate the reasons why a child is reading a book. It was important for us to understand internal motivation of reading. Most of the children cited that they read a book at their free time in order to spend a pleasure time.

**Table 1:** Student's answers why they read books. Their prior motivation is pleasure

Reasons for reading books	
To spend my time	55%
To better understand others and the world	35%
To "travel" with my imagination	5%

As we can see in Table 2, significant improvement in children's attitude on reading was noted after the implementation of program. We noticed a remarkable increase in the reading response of all. Generally, girls are reading more than boys.

**Table 2:** Percentages of increase in reading attitude from pre- to post- phase

Children's attitude on reading books	Pre	Post
Girls	35%	78%
Boys	12%	49%

In Table 3 we can also see the elements related to the amelioration of narrative texts' coherence, cohesion and psychological structure in which students made significant improvements from pre to post phase. After getting in touch with so many books to read (~100), they were able to narrate well-structured and coherent stories with rich vocabulary and correct morphology.

**Table 3:** Pretest and posttest student's mean scores on qualitative aspects of the narrative text (pre-post phase) after getting in touch with a great amount of literary books

	Pre	Post
Story structure	7.83	12.75
Vocabulary	4.75	10.65
Cohesion	2.42	3.78
Sequence	.88	1.39
Psychological structure	.32	1.24
Student evaluation	.44	1.38

We also evaluate the types of books used in class. As we can see in table 4, children showed a certain preference at books with ecological or social problematic. This is a very promising point to comment as our children seem to be sensitized in contemporary problems that humanity face up.

**Table 4:** Preferences of children in the kind of books.  
 Books with social and ecological content are on demand.

Types of reading	
Tales and stories	42, 79%
Mythology	48, 17%
Adventurous	27,02%
Historical	5%
Informative	12%
With social subjects	79,27 %
With ecological subjects	82%

We also investigate through a questionnaire, teacher's attitude on reading books in class and the frequency of doing so. Most of them dedicate time in reading passages from a book or urge children to draw some scenes of the story.

**Table 5:** Teacher's attitude on reading books in class and the creative utilization of them

Reading some passages of a book	78%
Reading a book once a week	12%
Role-playing	23%
Drawing on	54%
Creative retelling	2%
Techniques	5%
Reading actions and activities	14%
Events	0%
Reading groups	2%

**Table 6:** Frequency of reading books in class by teachers

Reading every day	8%
Reading once a week	12%
Reading once a month	15%
Reading on special occasions and holidays	65%

We also assessed the effectiveness of this program (Table 7) on student's behavior and internal motivation in reading. We realized significant changes on student's willing to read books as well as on student's behavior and internal motivation after the end of the intervention. The playful activities and the creative time we spend working together after reading a book captured the interest of all children and contributed in their social and emotional development. It is emerged that when children are engaged in activities that accompany the reading of a book and make sense of it, the love for reading is established more.

**Table 7:** Children’s improvements (percentage) from the pre to post test phase in using of strategy techniques, in showing appropriate methodology and internal motivation development during the reading process

	<b>Pre</b>	<b>Post</b>
Methodology	5%	72%
Techniques	21%	89%
Internal motivation	5%	77%

At the end, we evaluate the effect of program in classes. We manage to see the results by the actions of students and teachers. The results highlight the multifaceted contribution of literary-based programs to the educational process, their attitude in reading literary books and to the holistic development of all children.

**Table 8:** Comparative results from the pre to post phase after the implementation of the program reveals the noticeable impact of the program on reading attitude

	<b>Pre</b>	<b>Post</b>
Creating a library inside or outside the classroom	22%	98%
Establish reading time	5%	82%
Increase of reading literary books	21%	78%
Literacy activities in the classroom and in the school unit	7%	72%
Invite writers to school	27%	67%
Creating a reading corner	3%	35%
Family cooperation	14%	81%
Collaboration with the local library	2%	58%
Enthusiasm for reading events	4%	56%

## 8. Results from diaries of teachers and critical friend

Important information was collected from teacher’s diaries and critical friend’s diary as well as from the reflective discussion in each meeting with teachers once a month. The discussion brought to light interesting aspects of how teachers changed attitude on reading literary books in class and how much satisfied they were from children’s response.

Indicatively, I mention some passages from critical friend diary:

*“Teachers and Students got to know the world of Literature better, immersed themselves in it as readers and got to know “new worlds and faces”. In other words, the first active reader communities were created.”*

*“...reading motivations were created and the love for reading was cultivated. Libraries were created with the help of parents in each classroom and all students began to borrow books very often. The most interesting was the presentation of each book in such an imaginative way in order to convince others to borrow it, too.”*

*"It was emerged the close connection between Literacy and Literature."*

*"Now, approaching the end of this program, it is so encouraging that students read at any occasion (lesson, anniversary, news, excursion, etc.). Reading has becoming an important part of everyday life."*

*"Among the positive results of this program is also the fact that all students became familiar with a variety of readings. Oral and written speech was cultivated. All students write better narrative texts, using an enriched vocabulary. Some of them have begun to write in a literary way. The new generation of writers is born..."*

Here are the words of just a few teachers who participated in the program:

*"I observe an obvious change in attitude of student's reading. The children enthusiastically welcomed the various activities (visuals, dramatized performances, textual representations with postmodern writing fiction strategies, role-plays, etc.) and eagerly waited the 'philanagnosia's time'. Reading books was dramatically increased as we soon created a library inside our classroom'."*

*"The children enjoyed all this experience. They liked both the reading process and the creative phase... .."*

*"They collaborated very harmoniously and in an organized way, choosing for themselves what activity each of them would undertake, based on their abilities and desires."*

*"After the presentation of the book and the advertising poster by each group, many children they borrowed the rest of the books to read at home". ...*

*"They often ask me when we start engage with a new book again."*

## **9. Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of an intervention of literary-based program based on children's reading attitude.

Our data analysis reveals significant improvement in the performance from the pre to post phase of the study on teachers' and students' attitude on reading (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Yates, 2009). This intervention program had significant effects also on qualitative aspects of our sample. On this perspective, the majority of the teacher changed a lot the teaching method and students after the implementation of the intervention program increase reading, ameliorate their language, produced cohesive narrative texts with appropriate morpho-syntactical and psychological structure and engaged in discussions in a more critical way. The effectiveness of this program on student's

behavior and internal motivation in reading was remarkable. All the students, including those with learning disabilities experienced an obvious satisfaction in engaging reading and also an academic progress. They became passionate to read (Atwell, 2007) and participate in constructive discussions.

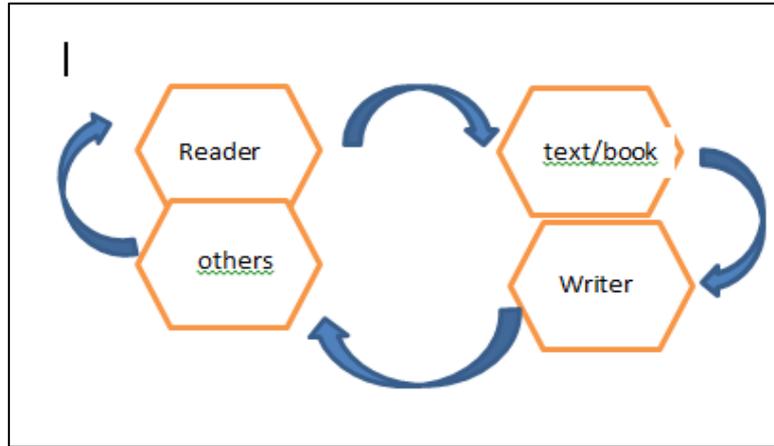


Figure 1:

More analytically, highlighting some of our findings, it is worth mentioning the fact that this training program helped the majority of the students to become more critical readers. This training program in whole class setting helped children to understand the basic elements of a well-structured text. The critical questions from the teacher after the enjoyment of reading, helped students to deepen in text and better understand it. The discussion with the class team and the exchange of experiences and ideas, also helped them to enhance their ability to think deeper and more holistic. They manage also their behavior during the whole process as many of them develop internal motivation and cooperate willingly. They discovered more ways to “communicate with a text, the writer and the others”. All these achievements were due to the fact that the students felt very comfortable with their selves as all the procedures were implemented in a collaborative way (students selected interesting topics, share their experiences, their problems, etc.).

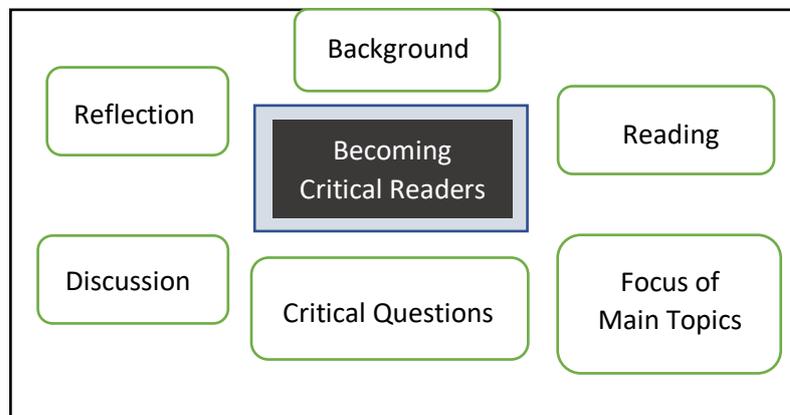


Figure 2:

These findings are consistent with many reader response theories and researchers (Au, & Raphael, 1998; Galda, 1990, 1998; Gambrell, Morrow & Pennington, 2002; Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; McGee, 1992; Langer, 1994; Gambrell, Morrow & Pennington, 2002; Rosenblatt, 1978/1994). Students are engaged actively, enjoyed books, experienced the pleasure of reading, tried to find the deeper meanings developing cognitively and emotionally. Even if some of them don't understand the meanings of some topics, they have the chance of social scaffolding from the team, according to the zone of proximal development of each, allowing to transact with the text in other ways (Vygotsky, 1978). The supportive and reflective learning environment motivate the whole class in reading engagement. In this way, an authentic learning environment is established in class and students achieve better vocabulary and reading comprehension (Gambrell, Morrow & Pennington, 2002; Smith, 2006). This reader response-based instruction model effects in the cultivation of positive attitude in reading, and students are more willing to spend time for reading (Gerla, 1996; Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006). Moreover, the discussion groups offer the chance for social transaction among text-writer and themselves.

Besides these promising results, we should also refer to the social and emotional impact of the program as a range of very important skills are cultivated such as co-operation, creative transaction, exchange of ideas, constructive discussions, development of initiatives and actions.

Based on our observations, many of our students developed their self-perception about their effectiveness on reading books which is a very valuable result, as their self-esteem is strengthened. The love for reading was established in the most physical way and communities of readers are created. The little readers transformed to critical readers and a network of reading community among all the participated schools is established.

## 10. Conclusions

Reader response-based instruction models and literary structure-based programs contribute to the whole development of a child. Except from cognitive skills, social and emotional intelligence is cultivated, as everyone tried to understand other's aspect by "getting into his shoes". Children were given the opportunity to discover that each reader understands and interprets a book differently, depending on their personal history and reading experience. Furthermore, better relationships among students and teachers were established, as a positive atmosphere of cooperation and teamwork is developed through the involvement of the participants in various activities. Values such as respect, justice, equality, acceptance, diversity were cultivated. Moreover, new ways of communication and expression were discovered with the utilization of arts (music, drama, drawing) and imagination and creativity are touching off.

The experiential seminars-workshops gave food for thought and creativity to teachers and consequently to students and the chance to express themselves, to connect to each other.

Such literary-based programs offer to all special time of enjoyment, a source of creation, reflection and discovery, the chance to dream a different world where anything can happen.

It is of major importance to impulse this love for reading through literary books at schools allowing our students to experience the joy of imagination, the magic of dreams and desires, ensuring the whole development of our children.

### **10.1 Recommendation**

It would be a good idea if this intervention program was applied to all grades students starting from the little readers by establishing a warm contact with children's book and little stories and gradually applied in higher grades where the needs of engagement reading are more demanding. Then we would have a better capture of the readers response. It would also be beneficial if this intervention was applied to different kinds of books.

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