Students' Democratic Political Socialization in the Classroom: An Action Research at a School in Chania

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Students' Democratic Political Socialization in the Classroom: An Action Research at a School in Chania

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Abstract
The school, as it constitutes a living organism of social interactions can contribute to the political socialization of students, besides the roles of cognitive and social development it already performs. The aim of this research project is the creation of a successful democratic school community. Within the theoretical framework or action research at attempt is made to connect the theory of symbolic interactionism and Critical Pedagogy. An individual team participated in action-research which comprised of teachers-researchers, researcher-facilitator and social partners consisting of pupils and their parents of a second grade primary school in Chania. For the data collection, the method of triangulation was employed using participatory observation, qualitative informal semi-structured interview and sociometry. Results showed that gradually, following a constantly redesigned intervention program, the interpersonal relationships of students were improved, democracy and cohesion in classroom were increased, political skills of some socially excluded students were slightly improved and strong leadership tendencies shown by some others were reduced. At the same time, through the research it was found that students can separate social from political skills.
Keywords: Political Socialization, Action-Research, Symbolic Interactionism, Critical Pedagogy

Introduction
The basic aim of education is the shaping and development of the future democratic citizen. In an ideal situation the functioning of democracy presupposes the direct participation of the citizens in political dialogue, their awareness, and their active involvement in political issues. The faithful utilization of democratic principles constitutes an "ideal model", yet, "like all unattainable ideals, it sets a goal. It is important and has great practical value to evaluate our behavior compared with an ideal situation, because it helps us improve" (Crouch, 2006: 57). Although it seems that socialization can contribute to the preservation and continuation of the already given political condition, there is always the possibility through for political and social changes to take place through education:

"*Always, that is, there is the possibility of breaking down the continuum in the transmission of predispositions from one generation to the next. And because the education*

of children is aimed at meeting future needs it is possible for one generation to transmit to the next different values from its own in a way not random, but planned" (Greenstein, 1968, in Terlexis, 1974: 124)*.*

Therefore, as educators, we can contribute to the promotion of political socialization of students in school, and to their preparation for political and social change based on an *"ideal model"* of democracy. When we refer to political socialization, we mean the *"process by which the political system is formed and transferred from generation to generation, it takes place slowly and progressively as the individual passes from childhood to adolescence and maturity"* (Eleftherakis, 2009: 51) and which can be a source of social and political change.

In contrast to the above, in the modern educational reality little importance is given to the promotion of political socialization of students. Although the pedagogical scientific current that prevails in education is based upon a child-centered pedagogical model of the New Education supporters, where the student acts on its own and takes initiatives, so as to develop multifaceted, not only cognitively but also to evolve his/her personality, in reality, according to Papakonstantinou (2000: 122) *"the child acts, develops and transforms in an individualistic context. It can not function in relation to society […] it can not contribute to the overthrow of established and the search of new social structures and relations. In other words it can not function as a transformative agent at a social level"*. This view corresponds to that of Hargreaves, who according to Blackledge & Hunt (1995: 47) considers that the educational system, despite Rousseau's declarations, Dewey's progressive views and contemporary child-centered views, remains highly individualistic and does not promote team spirit and solidarity, values that lead to a form of society where *"there is a stronger sense of community and social solidarity"* (Blackledge & Hunt, 1995: 48).

On the other hand, the sociopolitical context in which the goals and objectives are formed across Europe, hinders the development of its democratic and transformational dimension, since the main goal of the Lisbon European Council in 2000 was the creation *"of the most competitive and more dynamic economy of knowledge worldwide"* (Papadakis, 2007: 758). On the basis of this strategically important goal, a technocratic educational policy was formed, where as evaluation criteria for school education are used terms such as *"efficiency"* and *"productivity",* evaluation criteria used in business administration.

Planning of such educational policies, all over Europe, leaves no room for the development of an education that treats man as an agent of social and political change. Nevertheless, Papadakis (2007) closes his article with an optimistic comment on the course and change of educational goals in the future: *"Social relativity and the invocation of political values have not been completely subordinated to the self-evident values of economic type* [….] *Nor has the privilege of education that transcends the objectives of specialization and which functions as a field of value formation has been permanently lost".*

In a dystopian period, where education is used to apply technocratic and instrumental pedagogical practices, which serve the development of nations mainly at the economic level, Critical Pedagogy theorists oppose such a logic and focus on a theory of education that enlightens its humanitarian character and seeks social justice, seeks to create politically active citizens, who consciously deal with issues of justice and equality. The vision of Critical Pedagogy is to form a type of education, where students do not rest in the preexisting function of society, but perceive the social injustices and try to change them. Educators' contribution is of crucial importance if they understand that they need to create space for freedom and invite *"students to become agents of transformation and hope; I believe this is what we want",* argues the theorist of Critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2010: 279-280). Through

the reflection of issues, such as the above, concerns arose, which led us to conduct of the present action research. We know that curricula focus mainly on the cognitive objective of education, whereas education as a social function is neglected, according to John Dewey (McLaren, 2010) or the *"social learning"* according to (Bikos, 2011: 13).

On the other hand, the main goal of the Sociology of Education is to study various issues related to social phenomena in education through macro-sociological and micro-sociological approaches. However, the modern educational culture of the school does not focus on examining the social interactions that take place within a school classroom, among students or between teachers and students. Considering that Critical Pedagogy theorists, through resistance theories, support that macro-sociological approaches to education downplay the importance interaction among acting individuals within a school and the role it plays in paving the way for *"freeing teachers, students and parents from passivity, fatalism and submission"* (Thanos, 2017: 227), we chose to move theoretically through the micro-sociological approaches of education, in order to examine the social interactions that arise within a classroom.

Following this, we were motivated to study the dynamics of students' social interactions, as in a classroom were such social phenomena are not touched upon, an atmosphere is maintained, where little importance is given to the relationships developed among the students, as some of them have a more dynamic and political presence, while others remain in obscurity or are rejected by their peers and the socially weakest do not have the opportunity to express their own voice. Therefore, students in a classroom learn to function individually and competitively, have few opportunities to become acquainted with each other and to have more and deeper interpersonal relationships, and as a consequence, there is no cohesion. By extension , we were led to conduct the research at classroom level, which will investigate the social interactions of students, aiming at improving their interpersonal relationships, strengthening group cohesion and promoting their political socialization. In particular, we relied on the theory of symbolic interactionism, which claims that the meanings attributed by the acting individuals originate from their interaction with each other and are formed through their mutual action (Muhlbauer, 1990: 108). At the same time we implemented practical and emancipatory research action, which entails a participatory character, since researchers and acting individuals are *" involved in all phases of research"* (Gogou, 2010: 281) and leads to interventions aimed at *" improving problematic situations, with ultimate goal social transformation"* (Gogou, 2010: 257).

The methodological tools used were quantitative, such as sociometry, and qualitative, such as participatory observation and the interview with the class teacher. During the two action cycles that emerged, several alternative pedagogical interventions were implemented. Their implementation aimed at creating a democratic-school community among the acting individuals, with the goal to *" foster critical and creating thinking and social and political skills, i.e. the skills of cooperation and democracy of students"* (Eleftherakis, 2009: 86).

Theory of Symbolic Interactionism

One of the most important theories, which represent the micro-sociological approach to education, is that of "symbolic interactionism". Symbolic interactionism entails a micro level theoretical framework but also a perspective in sociology, which demonstrates the way in which society is shaped and maintained through repetitive interactions amongst individuals. The emergence of symbolic interactionism came in response to the prevailing perceptions of society, which prevailed in sociology for many years and were focused on

examining society from a *"top-down approach"*, emphasizing on the influence of macro level institution processes and of social structures, as well as how they were imposed and restricted individuals. *T*his particular theory was developed in order to understand the function of society from a *"bottom-up approach",* focusing on micro level procedures, which are emerging during the interactions among individuals, aiming at interpreting society functions (Carter & Fuller, 2015). The American sociologist, psychologist and philosopher George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) laid the foundations with his views, so as for later theory of symbolic interactionism to be developed by other scholars. His theory was developed with the contribution of Goffman and Blumer, two important sociologists, and played a significant role in the *"theory of roles and socialization"* (Melisova, 2014: 83).

Symbolic Interactionism and Education

The theory of symbolic interactionism has contributed to the enrichment of the theory of sociology and the Sociology of Education. In particular, it finds application in schools through the introduction of various research tools, such as *"observation, interview and content analysis"* in order to analyze several pedagogical issues more systematically (Kyridis, 2017: 155). Gotovos (1994: 42) considers that based on the theory of symbolic interactionism, it is possible for micro-level socialization phenomena to emerge and be interpreted, which arise through direct interactions formed among individuals during daily school life.

The theory of symbolic interactionism finds application in the study of dynamics *"that develops in the communication context of the classroom"* (Lamnias, 2002: 213). The classroom is a system of social interaction, which functions in an organized way, through collective processes, in which *"different individuals with different roles participate, but who are coordinated with each other".* These collective actions are performed always within a common context (circumstance) which acquires meaning from the people involved in it and created actions and reactions (Gotovos, 1994: 50).

According to Carter and Fuller (2015) Blumer's work is considered to be the most comprehensible overview of Mead's symbolic interactionism. Blumer argues that qualitative research methods are the only way to study human behavior. His theoretical orientation regarding symbolic interactionism can be summarized in three conditions:

1. People act on things based on the meaning they have for them (Carter & Fuller, 2015). Accordingly, when teachers have already realized that they are dealing with a classroom based on preconceived notions, they are able to engage in mutually supportive social interactions. In addition, they are more likely to acknowledge the behaviors and experiences of others than to disregard and ignore them. If they resist understanding where people come from, it is very difficult for people's experiences to be heard. However, if they understand, then the educators can immerse more in the different learning styles of their students, in order to develop alternative pedagogical strategies, such as group or individual work, peer to peer or experiential learning (Halasz & Kaufman, 2008: 307-308).

2. The meaning of things emerges or arises from the social interaction that an individual has with others (Carter & Fuller, 2015). Halasz & Kaufman (2008: 308) delve deeply into this condition, arguing that meaning is neither innate nor inherent. Mainly, we learn through social interaction about what things are and how we are expected to respond to them. Our behavior, in social environments is built through an interactive process. As individuals, we have the ability to change what it means to be a student, as well as the meaning of teaching and learning.

3. Meanings are used and modified through an interpretive process, applied by an individual, who manages the things he/she faces (Carter and Fuller, 2015). According to the analysis of Halasz & Kaufman (2008: 308), Blumer's third condition is a defining feature of symbolic interactionism and has a great impact in the classroom. This theory reminds us that educators and students enter an educational environment with an array of pre-existing associations about the specific occasion. Nevertheless, these meanings are not rigid. Through the interactions that take place in the classroom, out perceptions of education can change. Teachers have the ability to challenge students to think of alternative meanings of learning, but also to provoke themselves to consider alternative meanings of what it means to be a teacher.

The theory of the self-looking glass

Another important scholar who laid the foundations for the development of the theory of symbolic interactionism was C. H. Cooley. He became known for his theory of self-looking glass. Specifically, the mirror self is the product of an active constructive process, through the development of imagination (Shaffer, 2004). According to Kyridis (2017: 149), Cooley considers that *"the way others see each social subject affects his/her social behavior and the way s/he sees itself "*. Shaffer (2004: 54) argues that the theory of self-looking glass consists of three parameters according to Cooley. First, the acting individuals imagine themselves, as others are likely to see them. A construction of this kind, that is what others see, is basically like an image reflected in a mirror. Second, the acting individuals then imagine what others might think of them, Third, and most importantly, the acting individuals experience an emotional state about the evaluation they have imagined that others have done for them. In other words, if the evaluation for the acting individual is positive, the effect is positive (such as pride), but if the evaluation of others is negative, then the effect is negative (such as shame or embarrassment).

Critical Pedagogy and Symbolic Interactionism

A common goal of the theorists of Critical Pedagogy is the empowerment of the weak and the transformation of social inequalities and injustices (McLaren, 2010: 281).

Schools must be *"places of social transformation and emancipation"* (Freire, 1977: 81), where *" troubling education"* is applied, *critical thing* is developed and the *student* becomes the focus of the leaning process.

A precondition for the transformation of students into agents of social change is the cultivation of their democratic ethos in the classroom and the creation of appropriate conditions. As the theory of symbolic interactionism explores social interactions, it can aid Critical Pedagogy to fulfill its visions, that are social change and transformation, since according to Blumer, the familiarity of subjects with social interactions may contribute to the transformation of the meaning that subjects give to things, so that these meanings evolve and new ones are formed. This promotes the change of acting individuals' perceptions of themselves, of others and for the context in which they interact (e.g. the classroom).

Action-research and symbolic interactionism

Carr & Kemmis (2004: 162) have given the following definition for action-research: *"Educational action-research is a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by they participants in social situations, with the aim to improve logic and justice of their own*

practices, the understanding of these practices, as well as the circumstances under which these practices are implemented".

According to Katsarou & Tsafos (2003), action-research has a participatory and collaborative character, is characterized by a spiral arrangement and has a contemplative-critical character. In addition, it is characterized by a qualitative dimension. It does not conclude to results that can lead to a generalized law and investigates small samples that are not representative.

The theory of symbolic interactionism finds ground in the application of action-research, as the latter is carried out in small groups of people, who are collaborating. The social environments that are shaped by the existence of collaborating teams are necessary for *"reasoning, planning and implementation of action"* and consequently for the promotion of social reflection (Katsarou, 2016: 42).

Action-research and Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy has its theoretical roots in critical social theory and research, which focuses its attention on two fundamental demands: the connection of theory with practice and emancipation (Katsarou, 2016: 126). It is also influenced by the distinction of the forms of knowledge formulated by Habermas and correspond to the three types of action-research: "technical", "practical", and "emancipatory" knowledge. Critical educators focus their attention on emancipatory knowledge, as it leads to the fight against social injustices and their transformation through "dialogical collective action" (McLaren, 2010: 297).

Action-research and Critical Pedagogy have two main common points, the connection of theory and practice and the emancipation. Carr & Kemmis (2004: 209) consider the link between theory and practice necessary, as the self-reflective community formed in emancipatory research-action does not only contribute to the transformation of the situation itself. The collaborating team is called to reflect upon this, not only in its own field of action, but also in the field of educational action, as part of an overall social context. With such a view, the collaborating team realizes the need for an educational reform in society. A common ground, with the above assumption, is found also by critical pedagogists, who on the one hand are proponents of challenging the perceptions in education which are considered indisputable and self-evident and on the other hand "are committed to the emancipatory directions of personal empowerment and social transformation" (McLaren, 2010: 287).

Methodology

Based on the above theoretical framework, we were led to the application of a practical-emancipatory research-action in a second grade classroom of a sixth-seater primary school in the city of Chania, which will investigate the social and political interactions of students with the following goals:

A. improvement of children's interpersonal relationships

B. strengthening social dynamics in the classroom

C. the increase of political socialization and participation in the educational process of the rejected and neglected students.

The general purpose of the research is the creation of a coherent democratic school community among the acting individuals, with the aim to "*cultivate critical and creative thinking and social and political skills, i.e., the skills of cooperation and democracy of students*" (Eleftherakis, 2009: 86).

Following several exploratory and reflective discussions among the participants in the action-research, the initial problem was identified, which concerned the difficulties of some students to develop interpersonal relationships with their classmates. The purpose for the application of the action-research was specified, as the improvement of the interpersonal relations of the children, the social integration of the students and their political socialization, through alternative, collaborative pedagogical strategies.

Our sample comprised of 21 second-grade students, 15 boys and 6 girls, among whom were two 'Roma' brothers, two children from other countries born in Greece and one student with learning difficulties. The participants in the research were the researchers, the teacher-researchers and other social partners, such as parents and students.

The action-research lasted from November 2018 until May 2019. During the implementation, two cycles of action-research were created, where each cycle included three stages:

A.   Design (gathering information)
B.   Intervention (action implementation)
C.   Evaluation (reflection)

Research Questions

1. Can the application of innovative pedagogical methods contribute to strengthening group cohesion and succeed in redefining the social dynamics of the classroom?

2. Can the popularity of rejected and neglected students be improved?

3. Can children distinguish social from political skills?

4. Has the political socialization of students improved after the implementation of the action-research?

Methodological Tools of Data Collection

In the present research we used a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches and for data validity we applied the method of triangulation, i.e., "the triple cross-reference of data" (Katsarou & Tsafos, 2003: 63). The tools used for data collection were:

Participatory observation: Direct observations under specific events, especially when group work projects carried out by students, as well as the recording of a free diary, where events were recorded concerning student behavior, positive or negative interactions between members of each group and at the plenary level, during various social occasions, such as the classroom, the break, pedagogical visits and excursions.

Qualitative informal-semi-structured interview of the teacher: Collection of information by the teacher about the perceptions of social dynamics of the classroom, her predictions for the social status of students. Interviews were conducted prior to the administration of a sociometric questionnaire, as well as after obtaining the results.

The sociometric test: Through the sociometric tests we explored two parameters of popularity, that of sympathy and political ability of the classroom students, with which we identified the degree of popularity of the children, from the most popular to the most rejected. The children justified their choices or rejections they made. The sociometric tests were administered three times in the duration of the research.

Interpretation, commentary on the data for the two action cycles and intervention strategies

1st Action Cycle

During the first cycle of action-research we found the following:

1.   Regarding the popularity of the students based on the parameter of sympathy and leadership ability.

Both in the parameter of sympathy and in leadership ability, we observe that in the rejected we have only two fixed cases [BAH (girl), GIH (boy), 'Roma' brothers]. Their rejection based on sympathy are more than the leadership ability and in fact they both have a selection. Also, in some cases of children, while contradictory in terms of sympathy, they are rejected in terms of leadership ability [BAA (boy), GIK (boy)]. Finally, we find that the popular students of the class are not stable in both parameters, their popularity is mainly located in one of the two, except from (SOP). Obviously, this difference in choices is due to the criteria by which students select or reject , which are different in each parameter. It is worthwhile identifying the degree of popularity of student (PAT) who is neglected in both parameters.

As to the overall picture of the class:

The degree of class cohesion is $\frac{24}{420} = 0,057$. According to Bastin (1970, in Bikos, 2011), based on the result that does not approach the number one, we understand that the degree of group cohesion of the class is not great.

In general, we find that children's popularity stems mainly from the choices they have made in relation to gender. Thus, in the sympathy parameter, children are divided into two large subgroups, boys and girls. Of the boys, only STK (boy) has chosen MAB (girl). As the girls are fewer in number in relation to the boys, it is even more obvious that they form small cliques, except from BAH (girl, rejected). Based on the boys' choices we notice that there are mainly mutual or one-sided choices.

Regarding the sociogram with leadership ability as a parameter, it is noteworthy that children in their answers have chosen also children from the opposite sex. The probable reason is that children choose not on the basis of sympathy, but on the ability of their classmates to take the place or their teacher. This is evident by the explanations provided by the children in the questionnaire. Most answers were related to the high level of learning the students had, their readiness for help, their personality characteristics.

Intervention practices

According to the gathered information and after reflective discussions between the partners, the following objectives were set:

- Enhancing the sociability of students who have been characterized as contradictory, neglected and rejected.
- Creating conditions to normalize the relationships of some children who have given mutual rejections
- Strengthen the capacity of empathy and solidarity
- Children who have been characterized as popular in terms of their leadership skills and sympathy, to become more involved with children of low social status.
- Expanding social interactions among children of the other sex.

The pedagogical interventions we implemented were the following:

a. Group meeting with parents in order to inform them about the goals of research, our educational activities, and feedback.

b. Team-collaborating teaching, division into appropriate combinations of groups according to the sociogram results and of our observations and also the organization of a group breakfast.

      c. Application of Freinet techniques "What's new?" and "Free Texts" on a weekly basis.

      d. Implementation of theatrical pedagogical interventions on a weekly basis.

2nd Action cycle

During the second cycle of action-research we found the following:

Regarding the popularity of students based on the parameters of sympathy and leadership ability.

The comparison of the results between the results with the sympathy parameter and those of leadership ability shows the following: In several cases of children (9), remain stable in their popularity, both in the sympathy and in their leadership ability. In terms of popularity, three students remain stable [MAB(girl), NIG(boy), PAT(boy)], whereas in the first sociogram on SOP (boy) was consistently popular. Steadily rejected remain the students [BAH(girl), and GIH (boy), ('Roma' brothers)], but with half of the rejections in sympathy parameter than the previous sociogram.

We notice that other children have emerged as popular, compared to the results of the first sociogram. Worth noticing are the cases of BAA (boy) and VAG (boy), who while in sympathy their scores are in the mean and in the neglected respectively, in terms of their leadership ability have emerged as popular. Also, ANI (girl), who while in sympathy is in the mean, in leadership ability is popular.

A very important fact is that PAT became popular also in leadership ability, whereas in the previous sociogram he was neglected, as he was a new student. His classmates justified their choices, saying that they would like to see him helping his teacher, as "he is good", "he is a good kid", "he is very polite". It is worth noting that the children who chose him, except those who are in his team, are all rejected: BAH, AXS, GIK. The interpretation that may be valid for BAH and AHS, is that PAT, despite being a very low-key and shy child in the classroom, obviously does not show by his behavior that he rejects or excludes the specific students.

Many cases of students do not show large differences between the social skill of sympathy and that of political skill (leadership ability). There are little movements from the neglected to the rejected and contradictory or vice versa.

As to the overall picture of the class:

The degree of group cohesion is 0.060. Compared to the previous sociogram (B.S: 0.057), the degree of cohesion has slightly increased, but it is a small positive development in terms of group "bonding". Although the degree of group cohesion remains low, we observe that mutual choices have increased and mutual rejections have decreased considerably, in relation to the previous sociogram.

We are driven to the conclusion that confrontations or annoying behaviors among students have decreased considerably and there are no signs of intense competition among students (Goodland, 1984; Freiberg, 1999 in Bikos, 2011: 163). To account for this change, we consider that our persistence in our team-collaborating, teaching practices has played an important role.

Regarding the sociogram of the leadership ability parameter, there are thirteen (13) mutual choices and only one (1) mutual rejection compared to the first sociogram were we had nine

(9) mutual choices and six (6) rejections. We observe that there is a significant increase in mutual choices and a very significant decrease in reciprocal rejections (see table 5).

A second observation we can make is that this time as well, the students' choices were nor based on gender similarity, but sometimes the children chose regardless of gender, as for example MAB was chosen by three boys. From the students' justifications we realize that their choices are based on a variety of reasons, such as high performance, friendships, but also friendly treatment, as well as readiness and desire for help (see table 1).

Intervention Practices
In the second action cycle the activities that had started already from the first cycle continued to be implemented. In addition, we introduced the implementation of a museum-pedagogical program in the Museum of Education (Xeniseum) of the University of Crete in Rethimno entitled "The school I have and the school I want", which lasted two weeks and included three stages: a. Preparation before visiting the museum, b. Visit to the museum, c. Discussion in the class after the visit. Furthermore, the Freinet technique "Small Books" was applied and at the end of the school year a theatrical performance entitled "Me and you together" took place.
Interpretation and commentary of the data of the final sociogram
Regarding the popularity of the students based on the parameters of sympathy and leadership ability.
Observing and comparing the two tables, we are able to make several interesting remarks. Initially, in several children, a little over half, deviations between popularity of sympathy and popularity of leadership ability are not great. There are several small movements from the students around the mean towards the contradictory and some of the contradictory to the neglected ones. SOP (boy) remains consistently popular, but the number of choices he has received, varies greatly between hen two parameters (4 choices in sympathy – 11 choices in leadership ability). Also, two female students remain in average, ANI and STR. We note, that STR has more choices in leadership ability than sympathy. If she did not have three (3) rejections she would be ranked among the most popular. BAH (girl), GIH (girl) and AHS (boy) remain rejected both in terms of sympathy and in leadership political ability. The difference we observe between the first two and AXS, is that BAH and GIH have more rejections in sympathy than leadership ability, whereas AXS receives a similar number of rejections in both parameters.
Large discrepancies in the two skills are observed in MAA (girl), BAP (boy), NIG (boy), PAT (boy). Student MAA, while rejected in sympathy, in leadership ability seems neglected, by a large number of rejections. BAP, while popular in sympathy, in political skill falls into the neglected. The reverse is true with NIG. PAT also, while seems popular in sympathy, in leadership ability is in the average.

As to the overall picture of the class:
The degree of group cohesion is 0.071. In comparison to the first (BS:0.057) and the second sociogram (BS:0.060), the degree of social cohesion has increased by about two decimals. In combination with the gradual increase of mutual choices, we consider that there is an improvement in group cohesion, a fact that we have also observed in practice, as we consider that this group is more cohesive and functional. Our conclusion is confirmed through the research of Fotopoulou, et.al. (2019), who explored the improvement of group social cohesion, using sociometry in combination with emotional intervention activities in a primary school in Spain. The findings, of these researchers, showed that social cohesion of the

experimental group improved slightly more than the cohesion of the control group and this was evident due to a small increase in the reciprocal choices indicated by the sociogram (table 4).

Table 4
Comparison of mutual selections and rejections for sympathy parameter

1st Sociogram		2nd Sociogram		3o Sociogram	
Mutual Choices	Mutual Rejections	Mutual Choices	Mutual Rejections	Mutual Choices	Mutual Rejections
12	8	13	2	15	6

In the sociogram with leadership skill parameter there are nine (9) mutual choices and one (1) mutual rejection. In the first sociogram there were nine (9) mutual choices and six (6) rejections, whereas in the second sociogram were thirteen (13) mutual choices and one (1) mutual rejection. We find that mutual choices have decreased in comparison to the second sociogram and remain constant in relation to the first sociogram. It should be noted the fact that mutual rejections are maintained consistently low in the first and second sociogram, compared to the high numbers of rejections in the first sociogram (table 5).

Table 5
Comparison of mutual selections and rejections for leadership ability parameter

1st Sociogram		2nd Sociogram		3rd Sociogram	
Mutual Choices	Mutual Rejections	Mutual Choices	Mutual Rejections	Mutual Choices	Mutual Rejections
9	6	13	1	9	1

The changes noted as far as the improvement of leadership ability of the children is concerned, are as follows: a. Popular students decreased, b. The contradictory students and those around the mean decreased whereas the neglected and rejected students increased slightly (table 2).

Table 2
Leadership ability. Comparison among the three sociometric tables

	Student classification: 1st sociometric table	Selections	Rejections	Student classification: 2nd sociometric table	Selections	Rejections	Student classification: rd sociometric table	Selections	Rejections
BAA	Rejected	1	4	Popular	5	1	Contradictory	3	3
MAA	Contradictory	4	4	Rejected	0	9	Neglected	0	2
MAB	Popular	6	2	Popular	7	0	Contradictory	4	3
VAG	Neglected	2	1	Popular	5	1	Mean range	3	1
BAP	Contradictory	3	4	Neglected	2	1	Neglected	2	0
NIG	Mean range	4	2	Popular	5	1	Popular	5	0
BAH	Rejected	1	6	Rejected	0	7	Rejected	1	4
GIH	Rejected	1	7	Rejected	0	6	Rejected	1	4

ANI	Mean range	5	3	Mean range	4	1	Mean range	5	2
GIK	Rejected	1	4	Rejected	0	4	Rejected	2	5
AGK	Contradictory	1	3	Contradictory	5	4	Neglected	1	2
STK	Popular	6	1	Mean range	4	0	Neglected	2	0
NIK	Contradictory	2	3	Rejected	1	4	Rejected	0	4
MPN	Neglected	1	1	Contradictory	2	2	Contradictory	3	3
NIP	Contradictory	2	2	Contradictory	3	3	Neglected	2	1
PAP	Neglected	2	1	Contradictory	3	2	Contradictory	3	4
STP	Mean range	4	2	Contradictory	3	2	Contradictory	2	3
SOP	Popular	7	3	Contradictory	3	2	Popular	11	0
STR	Contradictory	4	4	Mean range	4	1	Mean range	6	3
AXS	Contradictory	1	3	Contradictory	1	3	Rejected	0	7
PAT	Neglected	2	1	Popular	5	1	Mean range	3	1

Table 3

Comparison of results of students' popularity for sympathy and for leadership ability based on the last sociometric test.

STUDENTS	SYMPATHY	SELECTIONS	REJECTIONS	LEADERSHIP ABILITY	SELECTIONS	REJECTIONS
BAA	Student Mean	5	3	Contradictory	3	3
MAA	Rejected	1	7	Neglected	0	2
MAB	Student Mean	5	2	Contradictory	4	3
VAG	Neglected	2	0	Student Mean	3	1
BAP	Popular	9	1	Neglected	2	0
NIG	Neglected	1	0	Popular	5	0
BAH	Rejected	0	7	Rejected	1	4
GIH	Rejected	1	6	Rejected	1	4
ANI	Student Mean	4	2	Student Mean	5	2
GIK	Contradictory	2	4	Rejected	2	5
AGK	Contradictory	3	5	Neglected	1	2
STK	Student Mean	3	0	Neglected	2	0
NIK	Neglected	2	0	Rejected	0	4
MPN	Neglected	1	1	Contradictory	3	3
NIP	Contradictory	3	2	Neglected	2	1
PAP	Contradictory	3	5	Contradictory	3	4
STO ή STP	Student Mean	4	2	Contradictory	2	3
SOP	Popular	4	0	Popular	11	0
STR	Student Mean	3	0	Student Mean	6	3
AXS	Rejected	1	7	Rejected	0	7
PAT	Popular	6	0	Student Mean	3	1

Conclusions

After the collection and interpretation of our data and after the completion of the two cycles of action, we are able to answer the research questions we formed in the beginning.

1st research question: Can the application of innovative pedagogical methods help to strengthen the cohesion of the group and to succeed in redefining the social dynamics of the classroom?

Results of the research confirm that the pedagogical strategies we implemented have contributed positively to the improvement of students' interpersonal relationships, but also to the group cohesion. The results produced by the last sociometric tables showed that group cohesion has improved considerably, mutual choices of children have increased, and mutual rejections have decreased. Also, some students who showed egocentric-leadership tendencies, gradually became more participatory and collaborative. Still others strengthened their popularity and gained more courage to demonstrate their political skills (to express their views more often, disagreements, complaints).

An ally in drawing the conclusions was the micro-sociological theory of symbolic interactionism, where interactions are studied on a micro level and from a bottom-up approach. The present study focused on children's relationships and the interactions among them. The classroom team served such an inquiry. The methodological tools used as in line with those used in micro-sociological research, such as observation, interview and sociometry.

In all our pedagogical interventions, opportunities for dialogue were constantly provided between the group members or the subgroups. Though "gestures" according to Mead, such as language and movements/gestures, students took over various roles which were consistent with the behaviors, intentions and motivations of others. This was observed during all interactive exercises. Children adjusted their behaviors according to their classmates' reactions. For instance, children who were characterized by sociograms and observations as neglected in leadership ability or as rejected in sympathy, and they had to present a task (free text presentation, improvisation, expression of views in "What's new?"), when they were receiving encouragement from the other children then gradually they overcame their inhibition and performed the task successfully.

2nd research question: Can the popularity of rejected and neglected students be improved?

From the results of the sociometric tables and the student classifications, we found that indeed that popularity of the students who have been characterized as neglected or rejected can be improved. This was not the case for all the children, as we believe that in order for such big changes to take place much more time is required for research and interventions. Nevertheless, there was a student who was characterized neglected and in the third sociometric table he was ranked among the popular. Also noteworthy is the improvement in the popularity of the two Roma students, who despite the fact that in all three times were in the rejected, in the last two sociograms the rejections they received were greatly reduced and in fact they had some positive selections. This was true in both parameters in which their popularity was investigated, namely sympathy and political skill. In these cases, Blumer's view is confirmed that the "the meaning of things comes from the social interaction one has with others." For example, when BAH felt safe within the group and understood that her view or complaints could be heard, they she began to express herself more in the discussions we had in plenary. Some children, especially girls started to approach and accept her more, and this was evident firstly, because at the end even she had one selection, and secondly, because the

justification for this selection proves that she gradually started to become more accepted: "She is a good girl."

Our research question was not confirmed for all children who were characterized as rejected and neglected in terms of their political skills. The case of MAA is typical, as from our initial observations we found that she was a child who was trying to get attention from others in an unacceptable way (lies, intrigue, verbal violence). In this case, we believe that the theory of the mirror self-introduced by Cooley is confirmed. The schoolgirl was rejected for her popularity in terms of sympathy and neglected in terms of political skills. During the educational intervention process, MAA gradually began to abandon many of her negative behaviors, by becoming very involved in the group and showing leadership tendencies. Her empathy and self-esteem were improving. For this reason, the class teacher was surprised by the results of the third sociometric test. She also believed that her significant improvement in her social behavior, would result in greater acceptance. Based on the above, we believe that the student realized the expectations of her teacher, but also of the researcher and reflected herself, as she thought that they saw her. Thus, she began to shape a more positive behavior (positive effect), since out evaluation was positive. She responded to our positive expectation with acceptable behaviors. The reason she had a negative evaluation from her classmates, we believe, has to do with the fact that they had not gained the necessary trust towards her yet.

3rd research question: Can children distinguish social from political skills?

Through the study and comparison of criteria, by which students provided their selections or rejections, we found that children can distinguish social from political skills, as in the latter they do not choose based on gender similarity (7 selections of boys by girls and 11 selections of girls by boys). The selection criteria they provide, differ between sympathy and leadership ability. The third research question is, therefore, confirmed.

Πίνακας 1

Comparison of selection and rejection criteria in relation to sympathy and leadership ability.

Sympathy	Leadership ability
Selection criteria	
Friendship 50%	Personality (courtesy, seriousness, kindness) 61%
Rejection criteria	
Annoying behavior 61%	Lack of trust 34% Low knowledge level 23%

4th research question: Has the political socialization of students improved following the implementation of action-research?

From the way sociograms evolved, we can't conclude with certainty that the political socialization of children has improved, as, except from a few individual aforementioned cases, no significant changes have been made in improving political socializations of students at an individual level. However, considering the change in students' criteria for their selections and rejections during the sequential administrations of sociometric tests, we can adopt a more optimistic view of their political socialization, since probably their perceptions may have been altered as to who can have democratic attitudes. Thus, they chose their classmates according to the positive characteristics of their personality. We note interestingly that the specific criterion exceeds by far the one of high educational level of knowledge and special abilities of

students, who have been selected, while in the previous two test it prevailed. Finally, there are more justifications which include the "Readiness for Help" criterion, compared to previous sociometric tests. Furthermore, as a rejection criterion regarding the political ability of children, the lack of trust they exude in their classmates takes precedence.

In addition, our observations from the school everyday life, enable us to have a more comprehensive view of improving the political socialization of children. An important note is that we intervene less in activities, the children become more autonomous and the pleasant thing is that they take more initiatives themselves, in terms of decisions that have to be made during various processes. The group functions more democratically and several times, when a matter of concern for the children arises (disagreements, conflicts, complaints), we interrupt what we are doing and bring the issue for discussion, where solutions and discussed and proposed by all children. Children who have been described as rejected, express more comfortably what concerns them and the rest listen with attention and interest.

The answer to the fourth research question is quite complex, as, in order to reach a conclusion, we need to take into account the data from the research tools combined with symbolic interactionism, that is to combine our interpretations, theory with practice. We consider that, although an action-research is a dynamic process that evolves effectively and in the long run, at the point this research has reached, there are obvious signs of improvement of students' political socialization.

Final Conclusion – Epilogue

In the present research, social interactions that take place in a primary school classroom were investigated and pedagogical interventions with an alternative and innovative character were applied. Results confirmed our general goal, that is, the creation of a cohesive democratic-school community. Also, several answers were provided and the particular goals that had been set form the beginning were achieved.

In particular, from the sociogram results, the interview and the observations, we saw development from a different perspective, as well as the improvement of children's interpersonal relationships.

The redesigning of action cycles, in combinations with our educational practices, helped, in addition to improving interpersonal relationships and students' social skills through self-reflective practices, to lay the foundations for the cultivation of dialogue, a tool that promotes student emancipation. By establishing the dialogue, cooperation and participation were promoted. As a result, the class group became more cohesive, in other words children became more connected with each other.

Improvement of interpersonal relationships, as well as strengthening group cohesion brought about the development of children's political skills. Students had several opportunities to become acquainted with democratic practices, which will be an asset for them in the future to function as democratic citizens, freely expressing their view, knowing and claiming their rights, always "in the framework of a tolerant and anti-racist culture, and …in a non-exclusive, cohesive and democratic life" (Eleftherakis, 2009: 48).

Our ally in drawing the conclusions was the micro-sociological theory of symbolic interactionism, where interactions are studied at the micro level and from the bottom-up approach.

The present research-action, which had a practical and emancipatory character functioned and evolved in accordance with the principles of Critical Pedagogy. It is obvious that within a small scale research-actions, it is not possible to reach the emancipation of the individual, and

social change, according to the requirements of research-action, and also the theory of Critical Pedagogy. Such processes take time and planning, so as to consolidate the foundations of emancipation and social transformation. Our point of view towards the expectations of change is identical to that of Kincheloe (2011: 248) who, influenced by Freire, claims that in critical theory there is an "obsession […] as it fantasizes new ways to relieve human pain and bring psychological well-being. Critical obsession helps us to go beyond egocentrism and ethnocentrism and work towards building new forms of relationships with different people". Embracing this view and interpreting it through our own prism, we come to the conclusion, that a key element that will contribute to social change, is the constant insistence of teachers to stick to their visions for the improvement of education for the benefit of man and to be guided by these visions, regardless if they often conflict with the so-called western way of thinking, which praises the instrumental and rational nature of education. In addition, it is very important to note, that these visions take shape through practice, in combination with theory, always in an atmosphere of solidarity, cooperation and participation. Finally, we believe that what Kincheloe refers to as "obsessive" in his writings, could not exist without the realization of a human process, which, for Freire, is itself a tool of "knowledge", "action" and "intervention": "realization is based on the idea that no one liberates anyone, that no one is liberated by him/herself, that people liberate each other" (Gogou, 2010: 320).

Taking into consideration the observation above, it is possible for us to expand our thought, on a theoretical and practical basis, as far as this present action research is concerned. In particular, there was a combination of theories, such as Symbolic Interactionism and Critical Pedagogy, which, both, functioned in an applied level, as well, in order to increase social cohesion by using democratic practices in a school classroom. Continuous reflections and circular revisions of our practices, due to the implementation of the action research and the triangulation of our research methodology, functioned supportively so that a new pathway emerged towards change and transformation at a micro-sociological level, that of the school classroom.

This particular research could constitute a theoretical and practical basis, from which to expand upon more classroom settings, the whole school unit, and, in addition, aim for a longer practical application.

The main purpose is to achieve a deeper insight into the observation, analysis, and transformation of social interaction and cohesion, involving other coexisting partners such as parents and teachers.

The ultimate goal of the study is the formation of a proposal for the gradual establishment of a democratic culture in the Greek school, which until now may theoretically exist in the educational curriculum and is described as a goal in educational policy, but it is yet far from its realistic implementation.

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