

Complex Thinking in Early Childhood: inferences, comments, writings and drawings on the invasion of Iraq

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Marina and I met for the first time in May 1990 in Brussels at a European Commission meeting on “The prevention of functional illiteracy in Europe”. Marina was interested at the audiovisual presentation of the actions developed in Greece. These actions were founded in a perspective valuing children’s ideas on writing (Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1979) as well as on co-constructive pedagogical practices valuing the complex cultural dimensions of literacy learning. An intellectual bond was established immediately between Marina and myself which became over the years a dear friendship. Marina introduced me in Italy to the work of Clotilde Pontecorvo, Franca Rossi, Lilian Terrugi, Marina Cinieri and to that of the educational publisher Ferruccio Cremaschi with whom I collaborated for years on the educational magazine *Children in Europe*. Even more importantly she assisted us in Greece for over a decade in early literacy teacher training actions, leaving her unforgettable mark.

I will present here a project developed during the years of our collaboration, more specifically in spring 2003, in the context of an in-service early literacy training programme for nursery school teachers offered by the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.

The project

The project had the character of a participatory action research and explored the weight of mass media and more specifically of television communication practices in the construction of ideas and feelings¹ towards broad social issues focussing on the issue of the then ongoing invasion and war in Iraq. The children were invited to discuss in their classroom with peers and the teacher on the war as well as to express themselves through multimodal text productions combining pictures, written text and their related oral comments. The individual and collective reflection on the data gathered by the teachers involved enlarged their understanding of the children’s worlds empowering them in widening the development of critical thinking and creative literacy practices with the children in their classes. The teachers involved were favouring a ‘listening’ pedagogy based on relations of understanding and

¹ In many European countries television education is an important subject in basic education. Some have gone to the extent of arguing that «a school which is not teaching how to view TV programmes is not educating» (Ferreiro, P., 1994). However, most programmes for critical television viewing refer to television experiences of fiction films and advertising. Programmes treating the news are addressed to older children, of primary and most often secondary school level.

trust between them and the children. This being an important dimension in the expression by the children's of their ways of 'seeing', interpreting, understanding as well as of the emotions felt,

The general context: Greece was against the war

Popular opposition to the invasion of Iraq was massive in February 2003 with simultaneous demonstrations coordinated in many cities worldwide. Greece was unequivocally against the war and even primary and nursery school children with members of their family or with their school participated in the vast anti-war mobilisations in the country, considering that the strength of their voices could stop the war before it started (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Comments of the child on the collage: I can see they are Chinese from the writing but the others are 'foreigners' because I cannot tell where they are from.

A month later, the whole country was following the constant television reporting on the invasion and the war. Thus images and reporting on the war entered the daily life of a large number of very young children and this viewing combined with the family discourse on the events became part of young children's "reality", raising their awareness on the events².

² Many studies since the early 90's have focussed on the effects of TV coverage of war and terror on reactions fear and stress in children. Research on children's' perceptions feelings and responses to war indicate that their perspectives are profoundly influenced by the news they see on the TV screen the latter however generally reflecting the dominant socio-political positions in their country while interpreting news media in their own unique ways reflecting "the children's interests, abilities, values and feelings This is what also emerges for example from the research of Lemish (2004), Götz (2004) and Götz and Nikken (2004) on the Iraq war. These studies however focus on children above the age group considered here.

The children responded enthusiastically when given the opportunity to express themselves at school on an issue of concern to them and to their social environment at large. On the whole the class discussions, recorded and reported, were extremely vivid, with arguments and counter arguments revealing complex thinking on the issues raised.. All children showed an amazing capacity of developing understanding and use of complex words, formal expressions and of tentative statements (might, maybe, even if) while remarkable was their building of an understandings for the metaphorical use of language, in the course of their discussions.³

Understanding the split screen reporting

Children had cracked the code of the “multiple windows” news reporting which offers often conflicting and/or complementary information on events and the role of the broadcaster as the coordinator. We can see this in the recollections of the two children’s reporting below:

***Nikos:** On the screen there were three small televisions. On one was he who sent the news and on the other one it showed, one time, the destructions and the fires from the bombs in Iraq. Some short of flashings, could be seen. On the other there was an American. He had the flag with the stars, there where he was talking, and he was telling the journalists what the soldiers were doing*

***Yiorgos:** I saw that the television on one side, on half of the screen like this (points at the screen of the classroom TV), was showing the night in Baghdad, where the bombs were dropping, and on the other half there were three small screens and three people who were discussing about Iraq. The one under the other. They were not at the same place, because behind them there were other images.*

Nikos’ and Yiorgos’ recollections, detailed descriptions of the screen representations they had seen, reveal a differentiation of the two sides, the American⁴ and the Iraqi and the efforts of the children to document their inferences. Nikos is referring to “the flag with the stars”, evidence for him that the person who speaks is American; George asserts that the three different speakers on the split screen presentation are not in the

³ The extracts from the discussions, are from the class of Eleftheria Basagiani.

⁴ The ‘allies’ were not mentioned by the children in general.

same place inferring this from his observations on the background images on the different “windows”. These elements for an adult could pass unnoticed but for the children acquired importance as necessary evidence to contextualise the events reported.

Similar responses are reflected in the extract to follow from a discussion on the shared TV news viewing in their classroom. We can see in the observations and the comments made by the children impressive inferential thinking, drawing upon different indices, so as to detect the meaning of the different words appearing on the screen (such as: the name of the channel they are looking at, the name of the broadcaster). They also show an understanding of the procedures to be followed in the reporting.

Katerina: *This is the NET news* [the most widely viewed national channel], *it's written up there.*

Stefanos: [the broadcaster appears on the screen]. *It is Maria Houkli. She is a journalist. What is written underneath?*

Teacher: *Maria Houkli*

Stefanos: [turning to his peer group] *So you see. It's her. It is her name. It's there for those who do not know her.*

[a few moments later three windows appear on the screen, on the central one the broadcaster, Maria Houkli, on the right window the reporter in Baghdad and on the left window the reporter in Washington.]

Panagiotis: *These are her guests. She is going to ask them questions.*

Teacher: *Where are her guests? Are they in the same room as her?*

Children (laughing): *No, they are outside, can't you see them? What are you telling us now?*

Tassos: *On this side* [points at the window on the right] *is Baghdad, it's written underneath. I know because all these letters appear when he says about Baghdad*

Teacher: *What is Baghdad?*

Yiannis: *It is the capital of Iraq, the biggest town. Where Saddam, the leader and the ministers of Iraq are. Stop now, so we can listen to what he'll say.*

Thanassis: *No, she must tell us who is the other one, in the other image* [pointing to the window on the left].

Yiannis: *Stop, so we can listen. She must say something.*

Tassos: *More letters have appeared. What do they say?*

Yiannis: *Up there it might say Washington* (Ουάσινγκτον), *because she said that we will go there and it starts with 'ου', such as the 'ου' I have in my name* [last name Μπούτος].

Teacher: *I read 'Washington'*

Yiannis: *This is what it says.*

Teacher: *And what might mean Washington? What do you think?*

Child 1: *It's a shop.*

Child 2: *What are you saying, where did you see the shop?*

Child 3: *It's a town, it has buildings. It's near Baghdad.*

Child 4: *It's a town, not far from here, ten kilometers from here.*

Child 5: *No, it's not in Greece. Listen he says what they say at the Pentagon, where the Americans are. It's from the Americans and the journalist says what the Americans say. He is their friend and talks about their achievements. Here is Bush [Bush appears on the screen]. I'm telling you right, he is in America. the journalist is there.*

All their mental resources are mobilised both so as to 'read' the words on the screen and to create meaning from the other screen representations. Washington for example is inferred that it a town *it has buildings*. It is however interesting to note the lack of understanding of the distances involved something that does not stand out from what they hear and see. Of interest in the above extract is the relation reflected between children and their teacher: the children laugh at some of the questions the teacher is addressing them [considering them not real questions, so evident being the answers to them], they even ask her not to try to fool them and invite her to be more observant and even want her to stop going on asking questions with obvious answers so that they can concentrate on the TV reporting. I consider that these responses do not imply a rejection of the authority of the teacher but rather that they are founded on a relation of trust and engagement between them.

On some 'technology' issues

Their eagerness to understand how technology works is well illustrated in the following extract which ends with particularly sensitive comments on the role of the reporters and on how enemies could understand each other through dialoguing.

Vangelis: *America that way, Greece in the middle, Baghdad that side.*

Pelagia: *They are far away. Further away than Athens. And how are they talking?*

Yiannis P.: *From television to television and from camera to camera. They have a 'centre' and they connect the wires and this is how we see them.*

Thanassis: *And how can they listen to each other?*

Panayiotis: *Maybe the journalist who is in the middle has a tube from one ear to the other and what is said by this one on the image on this side [in Washington] can be heard by the other one in Baghdad.*

Yiorgos: *What are you saying? Are you crazy? If she puts a tube from one ear to the other she might die. This cannot be done. Forget it.*

Panayiotis: *And then how can they listen?*

Yiannis P.: *Let's hear what they are saying. (A little later). I got it. The ones in Washington and in Baghdad do not talk to each other. First one speaks to Maria Houkli and then the other and then the other again with Houkli. But not to each other. She is telling each one of them what the other is saying.*

Yiannis M.: *They must be speaking on the telephone and we hear them. She must be speaking on the microphone and it might be connected to a mobile phone, which is hidden under her desk, and she talks with one mobile and then on another portable and she talks to the other, because she talks at the same time. She has two portables.*

Yiannis B.: *You say stupid things. Doesn't she have anything but telephones? They must have a telephone centre at the studio of NET like my parents in their medical practice.)*

On the reasons for the war in Iraq

Americans' and in particular Bush's interest in controlling the oil in Iraq was for almost all children the reason for the invasion and war.



Fig. 2: THE AMERICANS IN IRAQ
FIGHT FOR THE OIL



Fig. 3: NO TO WAR, YES TO PEACE

Pelagia's reasoning and her recollections of the reporting are particularly interesting:

Pelagia: *At the beginning, they were saying about Saddam who is bad, this is what the Americans and Bush say. But they were saying that even if he is killed the war is not going to end, because the Americans want to take the oil which comes out from the 'gotrisi' (drilling) in Iraq.*

Teacher: *And what will the Americans do the oil? Did they say anything about that? Did you hear something?*

Pelagia: *I thought it from what they were saying. The Americans are not going to take it to their home, because it is a lot. They will sell it to the other countries, so that their factories work, but the money they'll get they are not going to give it to Iraq. It is them who will keep it and then Iraq will be poor and the Americans will become richer and will keep Iraq for their country and in Iraq all will be doing what they [the Americans] want.*

Pelagia uses sophisticated words often mentioned in the news reporting for example the word "γεώτρηση" (drilling), which she has difficulty in pronouncing correctly but uses accurately as to its meaning. She has an awareness of the relativity of what is being expressed as truth. Most

impressive is her reference to the process of her own inferential thinking in reaching understanding of the events: *"I thought it from what they were saying"* a sign of early metacognitive awareness. She also makes reference to the notion of exploitation of man by man, in a primitive form of course.

Understanding metaphorical meanings in the war jargon

Many metaphorical expressions of the war jargon which were considered in the discussions held. The example below draws from a discussion on the meaning of the term 'anthropovomves' ('human bombs') referring to 'suicide bombs'.

Panayiotis: *They are bombs, which kill only humans, and they do not destroy buildings at all.*

Thanasis: *They might be bombs, which have the human shape.*

Yiannis: *No, they say about humans who are bombs. But humans do not explode, they do not have explosives. How can they become bombs?*

Katerina: *Only in fairy tales it can be done with magic. Or they may be programmed, some robots who are like humans which are sent to kill and inside them they put a bomb which erupts as soon as you cuddle or you touch the robot.*

Pelagia: *This is not it. He said about a person who had cables and a bomb and it exploded as soon as he fell on a group of Americans. Human bombs are humans who stock on them a bomb with cables and a watch, which says the time when it will explode. Probably they wrap them on their body with some rope. They may ask a friend of theirs to wrap them, and they wear their cloaks and they go to other enemy people and they become friendly and the others know nothing and when the time on the watch is reached, the bomb explodes and kills those who are close and kills them as well. Panayiotis: Aren't they afraid that they are going to die?*

Yiannis: *They might say: "one way or another they are going to kill me, the Americans with the bombs they are throwing. Let me also kill a few".*

Yianis B.: *Maybe it's done by somebody whose children were killed by the Americans and this is why they want to kill them, and because they do not have a rocket to throw at them this is why they do it. They are strong those who do it.*

Children's multi-modal text productions

The control by the Americans of the oil in Iraq is seen by most children as the cause of the war, this has been expressed in the class discussions and it is expressed in their drawings with the accompanying texts (Fig. 2 and Fig.3). The opposition of the children to the visible brutality of invasion was powerfully expressed in the voicing of a cry of protest wanting the war to stop immediately, *"in the middle"* (Fig. 6)

Their warfere pictures draw from the images seen on the television screen reportings, constructed however in the children's own subjective ways. Airplane bombs were beeing dropped (Fig. 2, Fig. 9, Fig.11) and Iraqi people were dying and were being wounded (Fig. 4, Fig. 2, Fig. 5 Fig. 10). Houses and buildings were being destroyed including heritatge buildings as well (Fig. 5, Fig.8, Fig. 10).⁵

Often the children created works addressed to the Iraqi people expressing their sympathy and concern. In all such cases they mention they come from Greece, as a tacit reference to a collective 'us' giving them, I consider, strength in deferentiating from the agressors (Fig. 10, Fig. 11).

In the illustrated story built collectively by a group of children (pp. 11,12) we can see a remarkable way of linking elements from traditional tales (monsters, the witch) with contemporary toys (robots, outer space creatures) and the realities of war in Iraq as they experienced them through the representations on the television screen. The solution they give, a combination of phantasy elements (falling in love /poisoning) and realism (political practice of elections) as well as the further happy end with the children drawing is, I consider, genuinely creative.

The children's writing in the examples presented here is of syllabico-alphabetic and alphabetic level⁶. Most important however is that the children were able to express themselves in ways that were meaningful to them, conveying their thoughts and feelings.

⁵ This is a profound different situation from what was obtained in the Seiter and Pincus study in the USA with children between 8 and 11 years of age where in the boys drawings of the war in Iraq: "The war is represented akin to a playground fight, with cheers and laughter by the victors. Strikingly different from high technology warfare pictured on TV, knives were the preferred weapon in the boys' drawings, and decapitation a recurring cause of death, with attention to the detail of blood dripping." (Seiter and Pincus, 2004).

⁶ There were cases of children where the teacher acted as the writer.



Fig.4.



Fig.5

Fig.4: .DON'T MAKE WAR BECAUSE THEY DIE. *Comment:* The dress is soaked with blood ; Fig. 5: Text: And these are going to be destroyed. *Comments of the child on his drawing:* This is Baghdad and this is the river. With one bridge. There are many[bridges] but I could not fit them all. These are the Americans who are putting fire with their tanks. The American camp. With their canon they killed an Iraqi.



Fig.6

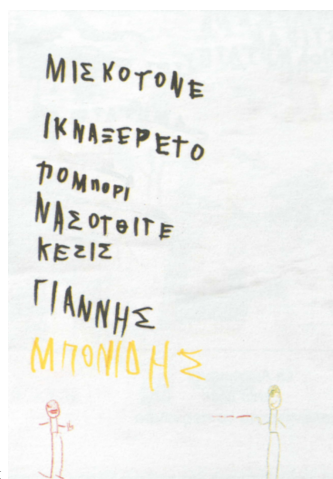


Fig.7



Fig.8

Fig. 6: ENEMIES ARE ALSO HUMANS YOU ARE KILLING HUMANS STOP THE WAR IN THE MIDDLE;
Fig. 7: DO NOT KILL YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT YOU MAY BE KILLED AS WELL;
Fig. 8: DO NOT DEMOLISH THE MUSEUMS THE SCULPTURES ARE GOING TO BE DESTROYED

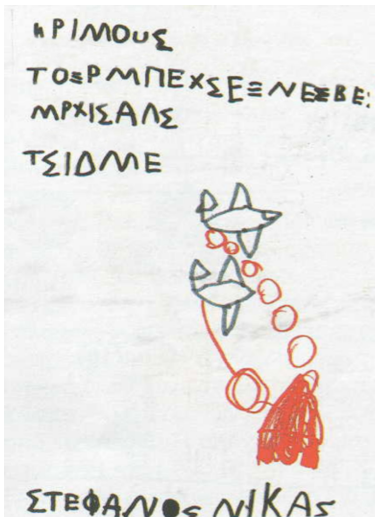


Fig.9.

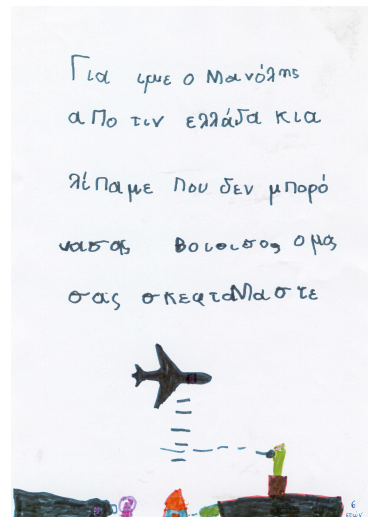


Fig.10

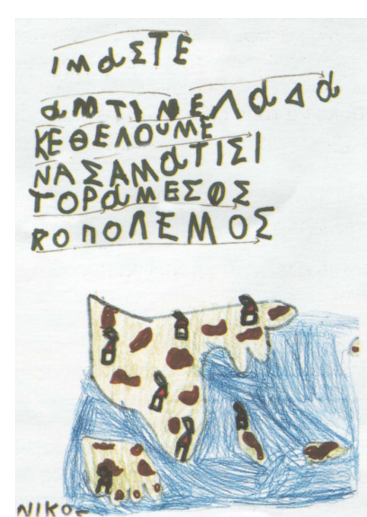
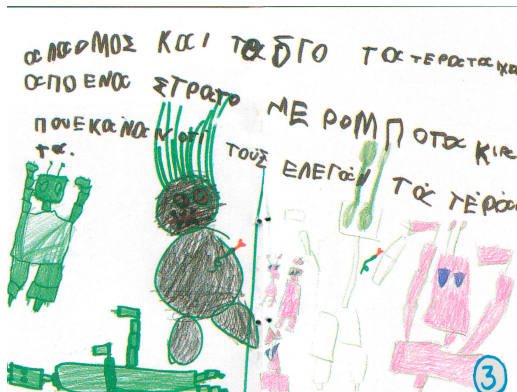


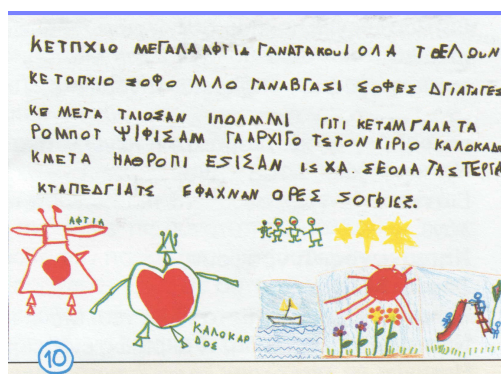
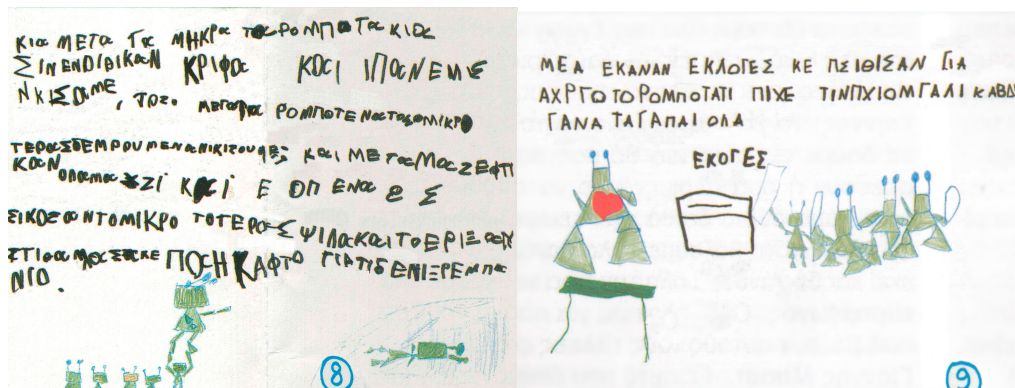
Fig.11.

Fig. 9: MISTER BUSH WE KNOW THAT YOU HAVE CLEVER BOMBS: DON'T THROW MORE WE HAVE SEEN THEM; Fig. 10: HI I AM MANOLIS FROM GREECE AND I AM SORRY THAT I CANNOT HELP YOU BUT WE THINK OF YOU ; Fig. 11:. WE ARE FROM GREECE AND WE WANT THE WAR TO STOP IMMEDIATELY



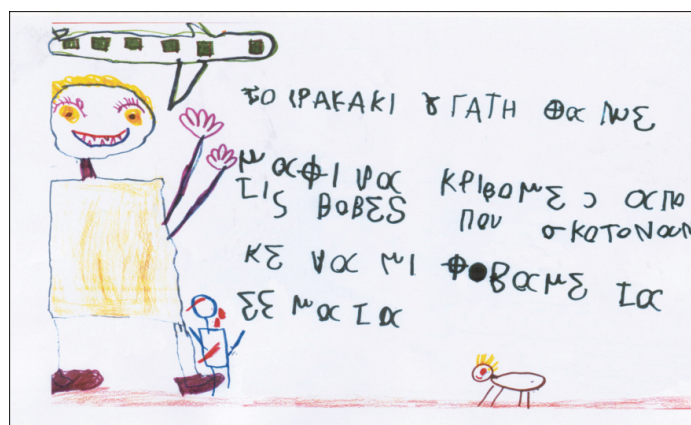
(1) What happened to the monsters who loved war

(2) Once upon a time at a planet there was a monster who dressed up as a man he put on a suit and said I will make war to the little monster in order to make it disappear and be myself the only leader; (3) But both monsters had/ an army each made up of little robots /who did whatever the monsters told them to; (4) the robots from the big monster played with remote control toys which through fire to kill the robots from the little monster, Bam! Boum!; (5) But the little robots were getting angry that they did not have such toys and then they became human bombs [suicide bombs] and were falling upon the big robots and were destroying them.



(6) But they were not winning only they were destroying everything and then aliens who lived at their other stars said: you are crazy monsters. We want our stars to live live we are not going to leave you destroy them; (7) Then they managed all together [to convince] her to become a beautiful woman and they sent her to the big monster and as soon as he fell in love with her she gave him poison and he drunk it because it did not understand and died;. (8) and then the little robots agreed secretly and said: «We wan such a big robot. Such a little monster we can not winn? And then they gathered all together and eh hop one, two. Three they lifted the small monster up high and threw it into the sea and gone is it too because it did not know to swimming;. (9) then they held elections ad voted as leader the robot which had the biggest hart in order [so as] to love them all; (10) και μετά, οι άνθρωποι έζησαν calmly in all the stars and their children were drawing beautiful pictures.

I would like to end by presenting one more multimodal text, a response in an activity of drawing and writing about someone they did not know but would have liked to have as a friend.



Text: *A little Iraqi because he will teach me to hide from the bombs which kill and not be afraid of the blood* [alphabetic writing with some idiosyncratic choices]

Nikos wants as a friend an Iraqi child because, as he wrote, he could teach him how to hide from the bombs which kill and how not to be afraid of blood. In his discussion with his teacher on his work he starts by justifying the size of the drawing of the the friend “*I made him big because he is not afraid*”. He then goes on telling the teacher that the small figure next to the legs of the Iraqi child represents “*bleeding and because there is lots of blood I wrote blood [εματα] with two ε*”.⁷ He is confident that he can introduce figurative elements in his writing so as to convey with more strength the meanings he wants, a practice we often find in environmental print. He is commenting further: “*...letter ‘ε’ is like number ‘3’ only looking the other way. Some times ‘3’ is written with a straight line at the top so I have also writen ‘ε’ some times with a straight line some timers curved*”. This is a very acute observation and the teacher praises the child for having noticed “*such things*”, despite the fact that the particular generalisation is not accurate. Then the teacher asks clarification for the non conventional grapheme in the form of a circle with a cross, which in one instance has the place of letter ‘Φ’ /f/ and in an other of letter ‘Θ’ /th/ the child unable to remember the exact correspondence and feeling so very much at ease and confident that the

⁷ The word ‘blood’ is /ematata/ and in orthographic writing: ‘αίματα’.

teacher is interested in understanding the meaning of what he has attempted to put down in writing he prompts her «*..to pretend she does not see one of the two lines*».

Finally the teacher referred to the figure on four which can be seen at the bottom right of the picture. She entrusted to me that she thought herself it represented some small animal and was ready to ask the child to tell her which was the animal he had drawn but as she said to me «*..at the very last moment I thought I should not be so direct and changed my phrasing escaping disaster. You will not believe what Nikos told me. I fortunately phrased my question in a more open way. Pointing to the figure on four I asked the child what he had drawn there and I was shocked to hear Nikos say that he had drawn himself walking on four so that the bombs will not target him because he is afraid of them*»

When talking to me she was still haunted by the idea that she could have shown such lack of sensitivity.

We have seen from the above examples a developing awareness in the children of the conflicts and of the power relations in the world and impressive reflective capacities partaking of the discourse in their culture, their television viewing which allows them to enter distant worlds and the pedagogical relations they experience at the pre school level based on the capacity of the teacher to 'listen' to them as well as forming relations of support and trust upon which co-constructive learning practices can rest. Their responses reflect an agency indicative, in the form of a germ of active citizenship, a right often denied to early childhood.

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