

Intercultural Encounters **IN MIKROS DOUNIAS**



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1. About this text

October 30, 2020 saw the evacuation of the PIKPA Open Refugee Camp (hereafter PIKPA), where the pedagogical project *Mikros Dounias* (hereafter MD) had been hosted during its first three years of operation. Since 2012, PIKPA had housed thousands of vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers, with the help and constant struggle of many people, self-organized groups, organizations and above all the N.G.O. *Lesvos Solidarity*¹.

In December 2020, MD's pedagogical and administrative team contacted the *European Forum for Freedom in Education (EFFE)* and the *National Association of Free Alternative Schools of Germany (BFAS)*, suggesting that they support the documentation and dissemination of the intercultural educational practices of MD, as it had progressed within PIKPA. We would like to thank both organizations for their warm response. After an online workshop held in June 2020, we proceed with this text, which is available in English, Greek and German.

Always tied to our subjectivity, we are attempting to present various aspects of our collective pedagogical experience, as enriched by theoretical references. This was our process: after gathering ideas and objectives, Nefeli B., a social anthropologist responsible for administrative issues at MD, conducted interviews with:

- Giannis K., an elementary school teacher and educator in MD;
- Katerina V., a children's rights specialist and educator in MD;
- Kyveli K., an early childhood educator and educator in MD; and
- Konstantina P., a psychopedagogue, psychologist of *Lesvos Solidarity* and member of the MD team.

In the following text you will find excerpts in italics, which are taken from the aforementioned interviews. Furthermore, we have referred to our daily pedagogical documentation records. Finally, in the end of this text, we provide references that have inspired us and helped us address our

¹ You can find out more in the video *Lesvos PIKPA, 8 years of solidarity*.

concerns along the way. A heartfelt thanks to every person who has participated in this journey, one way or another.

2. Framework and terminology

We find ourselves on the island of Lesbos, sometime in 2017. Parents meet at a playground in the city of Mytilene, to discuss and envision an outdoor learning community aimed at young children, regardless of ethnic origin, social class and other forms of discrimination. Informal discussions turn into a weekly assembly with the participation of educators.

The group comes in contact with *Lesvos Solidarity*, a local organization that actively stands for the co-existence and co-creation between locals and refugees. This fruitful interaction brings together people and ideas from different cultural backgrounds; among these acquaintances is Marit H., an Associate Professor of Pedagogy in Norway and volunteer in PIKPA Camp, who gradually creates a supportive network for our endeavor. In June 2017, during a *Workshop on Outdoor Play and Learning* with professors from *Queen Maud University College of Early Childhood Education of Trondheim*, our plans and dreams start to feel possible.

During the same period, we had our first meeting with families residing in PIKPA Camp. One Afghan father suggested the name for our endeavor. *Dounias* (or *dounya*) means “world” in all the languages of the people that are present in the meeting—Farsi, Arabic, Kurdish and Greek. And *Mikros*, which means “small” in Greek, because it’s a small world after all.

In October 2017, Mikros Dounias welcomes the first children from local and refugee families to the small pine forest of PIKPA camp. Until PIKPA’s evacuation in October 2020, MD provided stable, outdoor, free experiential learning to 31 children who were residents of PIKPA and 18 children from the city of Mytilene.

Why, though, did the above happen in this place, at that time and that way? Starting in summer of 2015, Lesbos had become a crossroads of cultures, languages, religions and different realities. A new community of

refugees has become part of the everyday life of the island. Meanwhile, some of the native residents, despite having themselves a history of forced displacement (expulsions and the 1923 exchange of populations) and immigration (to America, Australia, African states and Germany), hold an ethnocentric worldview.

Refugees—or rather immigrants, as they were called at the time—had already been arriving on the island for several years. However, not to the same extent as 2015: that summer, hundreds of people arrived daily, while some autumn days saw over a thousand new arrivals.

At the same time, public discourse begins to change. Those arriving now are called “refugees,” and they are conspicuous. They arrive on boats from the Turkish coast; they walk through the streets in groups, looking for water, food, means of transport; they flood the city center. Life jackets and rubber dinghies are abandoned on the beaches. Talk of both charity and solidarity come to the fore, and Lesbos often features in international headlines. Volunteers from all over the world arrive on the island; hotels are fully booked even during the “dead periods.” Step by step, humanitarian intake centers and technocratic management are organized. “Greek hospitality” is practiced at all levels.

By 2017, this global solidarity movement has made a strong impact on the island. The meeting of the global and the local, as well as the fusion of needs and experiences of refugees, volunteers and locals, created a unique synthesis which affects all those who care about the present and the future of this world. Myriad community actions, political and cultural, develop to foster communities of solidarity as well as public discourse. And this activist, we could say, reality develops from all sectors: “locals” from Lesbos and all around Greece, “foreign” volunteers and professionals across the humanitarian sector, and a number of refugees themselves.

Mikros Dounias is founded into this environment of cultural heterogeneity and political vigilance. Furthermore, its impetus is born of both social and parental care, since the first seed was planted by parents who wanted to collaborate to build a better world for their—and all—children.

At this stage, it would be useful to clarify our understanding of certain concepts, which take on a different meaning depending on who uses them and for what reason. First of all, **solidarity** is related to the ideal of social justice, and contradicts the notion of charity, which affirms social hierarchy. We cannot let ourselves turn a blind eye to the existence of different structures of power. We do not all have the same rights, the same social, economic, political power. Yet, we strive to be aware of these hierarchies, acknowledge our position and promote communities of equality and justice. Solidarity achieves its fullest meaning in co-creation and coexistence.

As regards the choice of the term **refugees**: In recent years we have witnessed movements of populations induced by, inter alia, wars and conflicts, poverty, climate change. We consider the question of "refugee or immigrant" a false distinction, which undermines the true essence of life. Borders are historical structures that affect us in different ways, depending on our national and social status. The most privileged can travel freely for leisure, education or work. Others find closed borders every time they try to leave their country. Every passport varies in power rank; some are so "worthless" that their holders prefer to throw them in the toilets of police stations and "reception" facilities. The people we refer to in this text have had to apply for legal documents through the asylum procedure, because there are no legal immigration channels for them. We thus use the term "refugees" (as we have done so since the establishment of MD) without, of course, presuming to evaluate the reasons and necessity that have led each of them to the difficult path of immigration.

Lastly, in the text we often draw a distinction between "**locals**" and "**refugees**" in order to identify the position from which each of us has participated in the experience of MD, and the different needs and realities that such a project seeks to bridge.

3. Intercultural encounters in Greece and the role of school

In most social frameworks, racism and prejudice are presented as individual problems, rather than the institutional issues that they truly are. Concepts of "self" and "other" are distinguished in the context of a specific social and cultural organization. The "others" are identified by the dominant social order as not belonging to that specific established cultural reality. As individuals expressing their own specific elements, they are considered a structural threat to the social homogeneity (Papataxiarchis 2006).

In Greece, the dominant narrative surrounding intercultural encounters draws from the dark side of European history. The slave trade, colonialism, and even Enlightenment principles are the cornerstones defining the Western "rational" way of thinking as superior to those of "uncivilized," "underdeveloped" societies, which will surely only profit from their contact with the "West." All over Europe (more so in some cases than others), "interaction" and "communication" with the "other" entail a clear cultural subjugation, just as under colonialism. There is little space left for real meeting and acceptance (Govaris 2011).

We see that the way in which the "other" responds to this call to assimilation determines both the extent to which they will be socially accepted and the degree of their integration. Anyone who seems indifferent or fails the process of cultural assimilation is held solely responsible for the consequences of non-integration. Following this logic, the "others" are accepted not for their existence as *different* beings, but rather for the possibility of their becoming *similar*: any value of their identity lies in its convertibility. Meanwhile, the imagined hierarchy of countries of origin also plays a role: a Western European's attempt to integrate is valued differently from that of someone from the Balkans, let alone someone from Sub-Saharan Africa.

In general, intolerance towards cultural diversity continues to characterize the Greek state, despite the immigrant influx to Greece since the 1990s. A similar intolerance characterizes to a large extent

Greek society itself, which is constantly flirting with nationalism and xenophobia.

Unfortunately, school does not stand on the sidelines in this social and cultural reproduction. Regardless of the origin and beliefs of specific educators and students, the national education system adheres to a logic that is essentially homogenizing, revolving around the concept of "one language, one religion, one culture". The languages of newcomers are usually shrouded in silence, religions are concealed, and the cultures of "others" are rarely visible in public. The large number of migrant and refugee children in school is still viewed as a temporary phenomenon, an exception to the norm. Contrary to its true objective, which is familiarization with and respect for cultural diversity, intercultural education seems to concern only the bearers of different cultures, not the general school population.

4. Intercultural encounters in Mikros Dounias

So, what is our position on this topic? We want a world that is open-minded and respects diversity, and we acknowledge our responsibility for its creation. We wish to participate in the processes of cultural change, and believe that this can start directly through our personal relationships. We strive to knock down the walls that keep us from seeing each other and living together, to build bridges and walk together; and to get to know each other along the way.

We envisioned a pedagogical community that would not aim at the homogenization or the integration of "other" children into a dominant Greek culture. A community that would honor the cultural capital of each person, and see each individual in their complex unique identity, not merely as a "local" or a "refugee." Our wish was to experience diversity as a source of strength and enrichment for the group, not as a problem that needs to be solved.

The founding and administrative assembly of MD, consisting of local parents and educators, worked to foster intercultural encounters among adults. *"I particularly liked our joint excursions. Families from the camp would get into the cars of parents from the city and those of educators—*

the ride itself was interesting and unifying. We would reach our destination, a beautiful natural landscape, and the joint actions would continue. A picnic would follow, where we would share food that everyone had prepared." / "My favorite experience was a mind-mapping workshop, which examined our personal experiences as children in school, or as children that did not have the opportunity to go to school. It was organized by an experienced external partner, who made us realize that coordination by a qualified third person can bring excellent results."

Experiences like these helped us look beyond the obvious and made us conscious of the way different cultural references can build different perceptions—for example, in relation to time management, or in our view of school as an institution. We were also able to understand that our "realities" are historically, culturally and socially constructed, and that the deconstruction of stereotypes and the creation of common ground are not just long-term, but in fact lifelong processes.

There have been issues, for example the appropriate use of mobile phones/tablets or medicine by children, where different views and practices were expressed rather didactically on our part. The above probably had to do with the nature of the issues, the group's readiness to negotiate cultural certainties and the inherent difficulty of this process. Along the way, we were faced with persistent, disturbing and sometimes painful questions. To what extent is the educational model that we propose open to co-creation with the cultural perceptions of "others?" Doesn't our approach to early education stem from our own perceptions and culture? Doesn't our arbitrary assumption that refugee parents would agree to such a model affirm our cultural dominance? How can we build relationships based on equality without reproducing paternalistic relationships or becoming didactic? What were the needs that prompted each group—locals and refugees—to participate in MD?

Contemplating questions like this is how we can develop intercultural competence, and it does not happen flawlessly. In choosing to take action, we chose to risk mistakes, learn from them, and continue to learn along the way. Paying attention to concerns, reflecting on our choices, and redesigning our actions proved to be essential processes. We

realized that intercultural fermentation and adaptation—necessary prerequisites for any intercultural encounter— principally concern us and often appear in the form of doubts, conflicts and shocks, which lead in turn to cultural reconsiderations. And though it is uncomfortable to realize how hard it is to put theory into practice, it is important to see this difficulty as an opportunity to create a more outward-looking, inclusive society.

5. On intercultural competence

The first lesson we learned is that intercultural competence is not innate. In cultures where language plays a leading role in communication, people regardless of age form groups based on linguistic community. We saw this happening with young children and asked ourselves about our role in this process. We saw this also happening in our adult meetings, and we realized that, in addition to all that we need to learn, we also need to unlearn quite a lot in order to be able to come closer.

Intercultural competence is something that we build. It is founded on a familiarity with cultures other than our own on the one hand, and on the other, to a critical stance towards all cultures—and especially our own. The more we inhabit this critical stance, the more clearly we recognize the cultural stereotypes that we ourselves reproduce. *"I feel that, as time goes by, I become more culturally sensitive, more clear-sighted. The deeper we go, the more we deconstruct."* The reconsideration of our own cultural stereotypes and the practice of questioning everything that seems "natural" to us are necessary steps, as we embark upon accompanying children in developing their own intercultural competence.

It might sound provocative, but we believe that it's true: **we are all racists**. *"After three years in MD, I can't say I've eliminated all forms of racism in me, but there's a lot of work going on, emotional and ideological."* The more substantial our engagement with the "other," the more profound the aspects of ourselves that we discover. In essence, we encounter our latent, deeply ingrained prejudices, which we identify and

try to overcome step by step. Cultivating our intercultural competence is a continuous process of learning, reflection and repositioning.

There are many pitfalls to avoid. We see no point in trying to interpret or accurately formulate how each culture perceives various categories—to indulge in theorizing, for example, about how a culture perceives gender, religious belief, politics, etc. It takes a lot of generalizations and presumptions to reach conclusions, which usually divide us instead of bringing us together. Instead, we can seek a meeting point; remember that we are building real relationships with real people, and that everything is under negotiation at every moment.

It is crucial that we try to recognize power relations between and within various cultural expressions. That is, between cultures we find hierarchical relationships, while each culture also contains various hierarchies within it. For example: historically, Western civilization assumed the role of the "enlightener" over the cultures it came into contact with, a perception that is unfortunately still strong to this day. Meanwhile, in its own public realm, the voices of women and children are heard less than those of men.

Moreover, we do not opt for a simplistic cultural relativism that validates every cultural expression. We can hold our personal convictions, while acknowledging that they are just that: *personal*, not universal. In addition, that they are beliefs, that is, structures that make sense to us. Similarly, it is crucial for children to have awareness of other cultures, to neither impose nor accept cultural imposition, to realize their right both to *follow*, and to *create* their own culture.

After all, culture is not solid or static. There is room for interpretation by each person; changes occur at every moment. We could say that every encounter, every relationship has its own culture. Seeing ourselves through the eyes of others, we can acknowledge our own ingrained behaviors and cultivate self-awareness and empathy; these, in fact, are the key components of our intercultural competence.

6. Interculturally competent educators

Interculturally competent educators accompany each child in his/her contact with the different "other." For Lobrot, fear can be born merely from the fact that something is unknown to us. The new is appreciated, as long as the child is led to acknowledge it in a positive environment (2018: 107). *"I think that the adult's key role is to create a safe and familiar environment, where the child can boldly explore the new,"* shares one of MD's educators.

Educators with intercultural competence approach "foreign" cultures with curiosity and respect. They use both appropriate pedagogical tools and their intuition, demonstrating adaptability and resilience. They trust themselves as educators, and the children as equal co-creators of the pedagogical setting. They care for, love and forgive themselves and their colleagues. So: what can help them realize all this?

6.1. (Re)considering personal cultural identities

As stated above, the journey of developing our intercultural competence begins by reflecting on our own cultural identity and critically observing the "given," familiar components of our cultural reality.

We all carry multiple cultures, dynamically interacting. Cultural pluralism within each one of us makes us relate to one another in many different ways. We are young, old, older, local, immigrant, educated, or not, employed, or not, and so on. Culture is not only associated with our ethnic origin but also with other key categories like these. Moreover, every culture has a dynamic sociohistorical context with internal contradictions, hierarchies, continuities and discontinuities.

Regarding critically our personal cultures, moves us away from dogmatism and towards acceptance of and respect for ourselves and others. Such a stance does not only concern intercultural encounters, but our ability to relate to one another as equals in general.

6.2. Respectfully encountering parents

An experience that we would like to share is the introductory welcome session with each child's parents. For Magos, the climate created during the first encounter between parents and educators is decisive, as it has the ability to unlock the ongoing relationship (2022: 315).

Before a child's adaptation to MD's daily routine, our pedagogical team requested a meeting **with both parents**, either in our or the family's space. The parents residing in PIKPA almost always invited us to their small wooden house in the camp. These visits provided us with key information concerning the children's cultural references.

The encounters were aided by an interpreter. We ourselves used the words that we knew in the family's language; this gesture was always warmly received. We made sure to follow the rules that were expressed or implied by the hosts and to ask, if we had any doubts about what was expected within their space. The parents offered us tea and various snacks or food, which we accepted with pleasure. **We need to be ready not only to give, but also to receive:** to fail to receive indicates a pity or guilt, and thus latent feelings of superiority. This cannot but hinder an equal encounter.

The main framework of the encounter centered on a questionnaire prepared by our pedagogical team, yet we did not strictly adhere to it. Our objective was to learn about the child through the eyes of his/her parents, and to approach their beliefs and practices in relation to his/her upbringing. We didn't ask any questions about why or how the family left their home and country, but we listened carefully when a parent took the initiative to talk to us about it.

In the last part of the encounter, we informed parents about our procedures and key pedagogical principles. We made sure that they didn't feel overwhelmed by the amount of information given. More details would be made available in forthcoming meetings with the family,

in group meetings of parents and educators, and in our daily interactions when they dropped off or picked up their child².

6.3. Observation, reflection, pedagogical documentation

How often do we take a step back to observe the children we accompany? *"Throughout the day, we educators seek opportunities to observe. Observation tells us what children like, what 'makes their eyes sparkle.' It can also play a role in their recognition and empowerment, as long as it emits unconditional acceptance and absence of judgment."* Through daily observation, we can understand a lot about children and their intercultural behavior and competence. Of course, we adults maintain the power to interpret what we observe. It can help to share our observations with our colleagues, thus filtering them through different perspectives and multiplying them. A further improvement would be to actively include children in this process.

Each day in MD, we documented our observations and the day's events in our shared notebook. We then shared and enriched these notes during our brief daily *reflection round*. Once a week at a predetermined time, this round would serve as our *weekly pedagogical meeting*, with an agreed duration, agenda and minutes. We shared how we felt as educators in the group, exchanged observations about each child, evaluated what worked and what didn't, and made plans. We resolved conflicts that arose and inspired each other. *"Good communication between educators is itself a framework that provides an opportunity to deal with problems. The discussions that we had at the end of each day helped us distinguish between our feelings and our view of a child, and*

² The children who were residents of PIKPA lived right next to the MD site. As a result, they often came alone in the morning and returned with a member of the pedagogical team in the afternoon. Over time, we developed the habit of having their parents accompany them on this route, as we could clearly see certain benefits: a familiarity and immediacy in everyday contact between the educator and the parent, opportunities for regular interaction between local and refugee parents, the formation of habits around the school institution.

this was useful not only for managing our emotions but also for our pedagogical practice. The documentation also proved helpful, in leading gradually to new realizations."

6.4. Cooperation with other professionals

We consider some forms of cooperation to be crucial to strengthening the intercultural competence of educators, including the following:

6.4.1. Interpreters

We have observed that communicating with a family in English or Greek falls far short of the respective communication in the presence of a professional interpreter. Moreover, when children take on the role of interpreter between parent and educator, the roles get confused and balance is disrupted. Interpreting is a complex process, subject to strict rules of professional conduct; it requires training and professionalism³. Official interpretation, translation and cultural mediation should be options available in every institutional framework.

6.4.2. People who speak the mother tongue of the children as members of the pedagogical team

This had always been a dream of ours, and it was achieved just two months prior to the evacuation of PIKPA. Farsi-speaking Mariam joined our team in September 2020. The children trusted her, and revealed new aspects of themselves to us. The pedagogical team was enriched and learned several life lessons.

6.4.3. Future educators of the children

By accompanying children with love, we learn a lot about their needs, how they open up, how they learn. When they move to the next pedagogical environment, we can pass on this information—and perhaps

³ More on this topic in BABEL's recommended handbook (2019), pp. 179-192.

some of our love—to their subsequent educators. Moreover, we can facilitate parents' familiarization with the new environment.

6.4.4. Supervision and trainings

Supervision by a pedagogical expert helps us constantly observe our own stereotypical behaviors, and manage the frustration involved in our work as (interculturally competent) educators. It can help us out of “stuck” situations and open new horizons. The same applies to trainings and (self-)educational interventions that are directly related to the pedagogical environment in which we operate.

6.4.5. Networking and open dialogue

Networking—both pedagogical and organizational—with other educational projects in Greece, which has been systematized since 2020, has been a source of great inspiration and empowerment for us. Our cooperation with a group of academic researchers brought us closer to action-research and the role of the “educator-researcher” (see full details in Magos 2020: 206-13). We experienced the supportive presence of a professor of pedagogy, who played the role of a “critical friend⁴.” Finally, we visited and were visited by fellow educators and university professors from different countries, who offered useful feedback and reviews.

Thus, we seek to link our personal pedagogical theories and practices with scientific theory, and we are interested in sharing this journey with the wider educational community. The rich precedent set by the *Little Tree* pedagogical community in Thessaloniki, Greece, played a decisive role in this.

⁴ This is a trusted person who, in a friendly manner, asks the educators challenging questions which encourage them to reflect and share their thoughts on pedagogical action. At the same time, she shares with them her own “understandings and interpretations” in order to provide feedback and broaden their reflection (Katsarou in Magos 2022: 209).



7. Languages & communication

Before talking about how we dealt with the question of different languages, we would like to describe our linguistic situation. The children of PIKPA camp spoke **Arabic, Kurmanji Kurdish, Sorani Kurdish, Farsi** or **Dari** as their mother tongues. Usually, they arrived in PIKPA having acquired a basic level of **English** during their journey or in a previous refugee camp. Often, they were also able to communicate in a third language that was spoken in the camp: *"H. spoke Sorani Kurdish as a mother tongue; her level of English was impressive and she was experimenting with Farsi and Greek. Her brother spoke Sorani, and was getting better at English and Greek. Yet he communicated with his best friend in Kurmanji Kurdish."* The children joining MD from the city of Mytilene usually had **Greek** as their mother tongue. The educators had **Greek** as their mother tongue, whereas people from different parts of the world who supported the project of MD as volunteers communicated with the group in **English**.

Concerning language learning and communication, we would like to share the following experiences:

7.1. Communicating beyond language

From the beginning of our operation, it became clear that we could not rely on any kind of official interpretation for our everyday communication, since more than five languages were spoken in the group. This quickly led us to our first conclusion: **Basic communication is possible beyond common linguistic codes. Love and safety help.** *"I remember a 'love' that brought close two children from different cultural backgrounds. I remember their looks, their hugs, their embarrassment. They had found their own way of communicating. They exchanged some words in English, others in Greek and some in Kurdish. But their deeper communication was not verbal."*

We learned not to rely on words, not to say much. Step by step, we developed tools that made it easier to communicate with each other: images and photographs, illustrated "agreements" like our daily schedule, secret codes. *"Body language, gestures, facial expressions,*

pantomime, pointing. There are ways, and we use them all the time. There were children where all it took was one look, through which they would 'tell' you and you would 'tell' them."

"Art, both as a means of expression and as a means of communication, is an integral part of life in MD." Music, singing and dancing played a vital role in communication, as did the organized artistic activities, the Intuitive Painting Workshop (see relevant MD booklet), the corner with art materials. For Magos, "visual language, coupled with body language, the language of sounds, the language of emotions, by overcoming language barriers and censorship mechanisms, are powerful binding materials in the construction of communication bridges. These bridges are, at the same time, cultural, since they are carriers of exchange and interaction of the different cultural elements among pupils." As he points out, a child who feels safe to express through art aspects of himself/herself that are not readily evident is also ready to accept diversity and communicate beyond a common linguistic code (2022: 509-10).

7.2. Valuing every mother tongue

According to Amin Maalouf, "language has the marvelous characteristic of being both a component of identity and a means of communication" (2000: 132). An intercultural pedagogical framework recognizes children's cultural and linguistic background and supports their families' efforts to preserve it. It values bilingualism as an asset of the children, and respects, develops and actively maintains their mother tongue⁵ (Magos 2022: 226). Cummins observes that educators can show their respect for a foreign language by learning one word in it every day (Govaris 2011: 199).

⁵ As Amin Maalouf states, "if I study someone else's language but he doesn't respect mine, to go on speaking their tongue ceases to be a token of amity and becomes an act of servitude and submission" (2000: 43).

One overarching observation has been that the more confident a child feels about their competence in their mother tongue, the more ready they are to engage in some kind of cross-language communication. Indeed, the languages we each learn are interrelated, with meanings being transferred from one language to another; this is the **linguistic interdependence hypothesis**. Cummins provides an illustration of a dual-peaked iceberg, the mother tongue and the second language that the child tries to learn being the two peaks. Beneath the surface of the sea, the base of the iceberg is common (the so-called **common underlying language proficiency**): the more I master my mother tongue, the better the foundations for learning a second one (Magos 2022: 393). It was also important for us to learn that so-called "mixed language"—the switching of different linguistic codes even within the same sentence—need not worry us. This is a natural stage, which a child gradually overcomes while learning to use each code separately (Magos 2022: 395).

In MD, we did the following in order to support the children's mother tongues. As members of the pedagogical team, we actively expressed interest and appreciation for every spoken language and dialect. We tried to foster an environment of love and trust, where each child felt comfortable expressing themselves in their mother tongue and in the language(s) they were trying to master. **In our daily interactions, children and educators learned words in different languages and chose some of them to express certain meanings.** Thus, we would *wash our hands* in English, ask for *bread* in Greek, predict *rain* in Kurdish, say *thank you* in Farsi, and so on. Lastly, interpreters, parents and older siblings often accompanied our morning routine by speaking their language.

7.3. Managing a multilingual environment

Young children are not culturally blind (Magos 2022: 73, 97), as we had romantically assumed before beginning our operation. In the first period, the creation of cliques of children speaking the same language was particularly intense; a phenomenon that never ceased. We discovered, not without frustration, that contact between children is not enough to create an inclusive climate; rather, some kind of friendship needs to develop (Magos 2022: 48, 75, 86, 101). It quickly became clear to us that,

if we wanted to build some basic cohesion in our group, targeted pedagogical interventions were necessary.

We set the following linguistic objectives, which are also aspects of intercultural competence: Every child recognizes that the exact same meaning can be expressed in different languages, even if sounds produced are completely different. These languages have the same intrinsic value and cannot be ranked as superior or inferior. Every language, just like every person, constitutes a world... and it's exciting to explore new worlds.

7.4. Learning languages the natural way

The specific environment of MD guided our team to focus on language learning in a natural way. Children would come and go quite frequently; no refugee family knew whether their stay on Lesbos would last a week, a month or a year. The sudden departure of children overnight and the immediate arrival of another child would render any long-term language learning intervention ineffective. That said, we want to stress that we do not question the need for targeted teaching of the “official” language to children who need to adapt to a new cultural reality.

We agree with Cummins that **language learning needs to be based on frameworks that respond to children's needs, wishes and questions** (Magos 2022: 381). *"Everything is best learned through experience. It was completely different to try to teach to the children the word 'carrot' by repeating it a hundred times, in comparison to K. asking for a 'carrot' and A. realizing at some point what her friend was asking for. From that moment on, she had it."* Through authentic conversations between educators and children, we saw the latter enriching their vocabulary and attempting to convey situations and feelings. We noticed that we needed to wait, to remain silent a bit longer than we'd expected. We experimented with how much to "correct" children, and avoided asking them things that they already know, as kindergarten teachers tend to do (i.e. "What color is this?"). **The things we talk about don't need to be boring, neither for us nor for the children!**

In a gentle and supportive manner, we tried to constantly show children that communication among them is possible. *"Another thing that helps is to show children that, even if the other person doesn't understand, they can continue to speak showing what they want with gestures. I remember how sad M. was the day that he happened to be the only child speaking Greek. He told us that he did not want to play with the other children, because they did not speak Greek and they did not understand him. 'Well, let me show you something,' I said, 'What do you want to play?' He gave a concrete reply. 'Fine, let's go and tell R,' I continued. R. understood at once! M. turned, looked at me and said, 'He got it!'. 'I know, that's why I'm telling you, talk to him and he will understand some things now, he will understand some things later, in the same way that he can talk to you.' The children who lived in the camp did this without our help, because they had to find ways to coexist in their everyday life."* We were glad to see some children learn from one another through an intercultural friendship. *"A. and K., of Greek and Afghan origin respectively, eventually became very close friends. Now, the one says 'I am A's teacher.' and the other adds 'I am K's teacher' [in greek]."*

7.5. The circle as a learning environment

In MD, a large part of language learning and sharing took place in a circle⁶. All members of a circle have the same distance from its center, while their eyes are clearly visible from every point.

Sharing circle: The answer from everyone to the questions *"how am I today?"* and *"what do I want to play?"* was the closest to a children's assembly that our multicultural team could reach. This circle was the time to listen to one another, look into each other's eyes and strengthen the sense of team.

⁶ The spaces we had at our disposal at PIKPA camp were circular in shape: the Solidarity Dome of the camp, our yurt, our eating table, the placement of easels in the Intuitive Painting Workshop and the logs where we would gather.

Eating circle: An educator, together with the children who wished to help (n.b. a good chance to work on gender stereotypes!), set the table, cut the fruit and the bread, prepared everything and set it out, while focusing on relevant vocabulary. One child undertook the task to inform the rest when our breakfast was ready. We sat around the table and sang the improvised, multilingual chant "thank you for the food." Having translated the song to all of our spoken languages, we chose one every day, all the while learning to distinguish each other's mother tongue. We shared the same food, which we named in all languages.

Good-bye circle: Every member of the circle would daily be given space to show something that others would imitate and to say goodbye in his/her own way. As part of the goodbye song, each member's name would be repeated several times by both him/her and the whole group. We believe that the accurate use and the correct pronunciation of the names of the children and their beloved ones affect their feelings of acceptance and safety in the group.

8. Learning in nature

We should clarify at the outset that the choice of outdoor learning was not the outcome of equal intercultural co-creation, but rather one of the initial decisions that local parents and educators met before meeting with the parents in PIKPA camp. We quickly noticed some hesitancy on the part of the latter: based on their own cultural experiences, they had a completely different impression of what "school" meant. It was not at all self-evident that children would not dress up, or that playing with mud is an opportunity to learn. Often, learning in nature was far from what they hoped for their children, in this new continent they had arrived in.

From the very first meeting with each family, it was important for us to explain that outdoor learning was a conscious pedagogical choice, not related to a lack of better facilities. There were two factors that somewhat balanced the unpleasant feeling of cultural imposition, though these don't, of course, bridge the gap in co-creation. Firstly, the MD framework seemed to meet the needs and wishes of the children themselves; and secondly, the parents eventually trusted us, as they saw their children calm, happy and willing to come to "school."⁷

So, what was the role of nature in our intercultural encounter? **In relation to the inclusive effect of nature, we observed the following:**

⁷ What was this "school" like? In a corner of PIKPA camp, just a few meters from the sea, there was a small pine forest at our disposal. The MD site was not separated from the rest of the camp by any fences or borders, other than occasional colorful garlands and flower pots. Our base was a wonderful yurt, a circular Mongolian tent with a wooden frame, natural wool for insulation, a wood stove that we lit together with the children. Wooden shelves accommodated books and materials, carpets and pillows created an inviting atmosphere. Every child could at any time choose whether to be inside the yurt or outside, in the pine forest; they most frequently chose the second. All children had at their disposal a full body rain suit and clothes suitable for cold weather.

8.1. Not reproducing stereotypes

Our presence in nature alleviated differences and offered tangible ways out of cultural classifications such as ethnicity, gender, adulthood/childhood. **We felt that the natural environment does not reproduce stereotypes related to...**

...culture: Buildings, materials, books are carriers of cultural characteristics. On the other hand, the stimuli for discovery and play, as well as the materials we encounter in nature, are free from expressions of the dominant culture. Nature is culturally neutral.

...gender: In nature, there are no materials or activities intended solely for boys or girls. The branches are not pink or blue depending on whom they are addressed to. To support this aspect, the educators' conduct plays an important role: we need to try to act according to our individual inclinations, not the gender identities that have been attributed to us during our lives.

... age: We have noticed that the coexistence of children and adults in nature has a balancing effect in relation to adultism, the discrimination against children on the grounds of their young age⁸. Some relevant insights of the MD pedagogical team follow: *"The child is more free to enact his/her own initiatives in nature rather than in a house built and decorated by adults." / "In the company of children in nature I learn, I remember what it's like to observe, to experiment, to get dirty. I am living with the seasons, I am experiencing real time." / "In nature, I can't help but admire children's observation skills. They can see, hear, and smell things that I do not perceive. A. asks me 'What was that?' and, of course, I haven't heard anything. 'Listen, listen!', he says, and I realize that I need to make an effort to be able to hear, just like he does in order to count to five. Eventually, I heard it and I think it was a woodpecker! The same goes for smells."*

⁸ Read more on this important topic on the MD booklet [*Adultism*](#).

8.2. Common experiences

Both intercultural and environmental education focus on pupils' experiences (Magos 2022: 62). *"In nature, learning accompanies experience, it is the experience. Every shared experience brings us together,"* an educator in MD tells us. Indeed, in nature, children who speak different languages embody experiences that not only offer a common vocabulary but also new communication codes: *"it's much easier to talk about something when you see it, feel it, touch it."*

We feel that experiences like the following have a unifying effect: *"Every morning, while observing the flowers, we could see most of them kept their petals shut before thriving in full sun. But daisies were always open. One day, early in the morning, we happened to walk around with H. and A., and what did we see? Closed daisies! We concluded that daisies open with less light than any other flower we had observed until then." / "In nature you never stop to explore. We recently discovered the egg case of a praying mantis. The children found it; I didn't know myself what it was until the next day when we saw dozens of tiny praying mantises hanging from it as they emerged."*

8.3. Cooperation and solidarity

Another point of intersection between intercultural and environmental education is the key role played by cooperation and group activities (Magos 2022: 65). *"Cooperation becomes unavoidable and desirable by everyone, since one can easily move a model brick to build a model house, but what about a real log? Or digging a puddle or climbing a high tree branch? These kinds of activities require company! There are times that children's ideas cannot be implemented without the help of others, so they understand the value of solidarity firsthand. In nature, solidarity and cooperation prove to be essential elements".*

We have observed that the pursuit of a common goal weakens segregations. So, we built constructions out of wood, rope and other materials in our outdoor space, which could only be "played" by two or

more children. We also established a walking tour in a nearby forest: *"A walk in the woods helps foster solidarity. If anyone is left behind, we wait for them. Anyone who falls is picked up by another child. If a child gets hurt or lost, everyone feels the responsibility to help."*

8.4. Freedom of movement and choice

The freedom of movement offered by the natural environment, in combination with an accordingly structured pedagogical framework, literally enables contact between children. In contrast, the mother of a "local" child attending MD told us of their experience after he started public school. Through a series of questions, the mother was trying to find out why the child had no contact with the only child of refugee background in his new class. The mystery was finally solved: "but, mom, how can we hang out, since he's sitting ten desks away from me!"

As a framework, the natural environment enables every child to choose whether to be alone or with others at any given moment. *"One factor that helps is that there is ample space. In nature, a child can run, shout, walk away from the other children. This possibility takes the pressure off but it also makes one go deep within oneself. We see children choosing to be alone in the natural environment in order to calm down, think or play. I remember E. lying on the grass, out in the sun, mind wandering. I was talking to him and he wasn't listening! If this is not meditation, then what is?"* **We feel that a real intercultural encounter can happen when children are ready for an emotional encounter, when they choose it themselves.**

8.5. Respect for diversity

As newcomers in MD, many children exhibit violent behavior towards other living beings—throwing stones at dogs, killing worms and spiders without hesitation, uprooting plants. Such behaviors are mitigated as the children become part of the group. How? Time and again, we discovered

the beauty of the world of ants, as well as other creatures, primarily through observation. Also, for a long time we took care of a stray dog that a child named Koulouki. Moreover, *"When children started cutting off flowers to bring them to me as a present, I thanked them for thinking of me but suggested that we might want to think of the flowers too, because now they will wither. We placed the flowers inside the yurt, in order to see them the following day. It so happened that in those days we would observe a flower every day to see what time it opened its petals—thankfully, this one had been spared. The following day, we went to smell this flower and the children suggested that we also see the ones they had cut. When they saw what had become of them, we discussed that we would never again see the ones we had cut off like we used to see them every day, because they had died. We decided that it is better both for us and for them to leave them in peace."*

Pedagogical reflection quickly distanced us from anthropomorphic approaches to this issue, wherein the ant has children and its children will cry at home if we kill it. In addition, the concepts of deep ecology, which a mother introduced to the team, allowed us to take a critical view of anthropocentric approaches such as "we protect trees, so that they can provide us with oxygen." The natural environment is valuable in its own right, not for what it provides to humans, nor for sustaining the human life cycle.

In the end, cultivating respect for all creatures gives rise to the cultivation of empathy, a cornerstone of intercultural competence. *"Children have the opportunity to observe the time it takes for a leaf to grow and a bud to bloom, and this makes them respect this effort."* In addition, *"an example is that of approaching wild animals, birds, lizards, etc. The child needs to feel the fear and reticence of an animal in order to be able to approach it, he/she needs to calm down and take time to make the animal feel safe. This not only helps children foster empathy for animals, but also encourages them to put themselves in someone else's shoes when trying to connect with people. In essence, they understand the responsibility they have towards any other being."*

9. Play & Humor

"Play can provide an effective ground for the development of intercultural acquaintance, communication and interaction" (Magos 2022: 127). But how?

9.1. Free play and intercultural encounters

Before proceeding further, we need to provide a concise definition of free play, which is far from simple. We have decided to go for Roger Caillois' descriptive definition: Play is a free, not obligatory activity, circumscribed within limits of space and time. It is an unproductive activity, the course of which cannot be determined. Play is always governed by rules but also accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality, as against real life (2001).

What are some attributes of free play that foster intercultural encounters?

9.1.1. Cultivation of social skills

Free play offers fertile ground for the cultivation of social skills. It allows players to build innovative bridges of communication and to practice cooperation, express feelings and resolve conflicts. According to educators in MD: *"In most cases, in order to be able to play with others, one needs to form relationships on which play is based. One needs, for example, to learn to give space to others, to wait for his/her turn, to share objects, to come forward and attract attention, and much more. Play is associated with empathy and emotional sharing." / "Watching people move around, being alive, being present, connected to each other, to the space. They say that in play, a different dimension is created; that's what you could see in MD, you could see the different dimensions of play within the same space. It was pretty magical."*

9.1.2. Fairness

For researcher Hans Furth, the “fairness rule” seems to be the primary meta-rule of free play. According to Peter Gray, professor of psychology, children in play are constantly dealing with fairness, in its direct and essential form. Gray notes that the phrase “that’s not fair!” (to me or to any other player) is the most common phrase during play. He also argues that the popular saying “do unto others as **you** would have them do unto **you**” is not sufficient in play context. The golden rule of play, as he calls it, is “do unto others as **they** would have you do unto **them**.” In addition to self-awareness (what I need), the player has to also show empathy (what you need). But why?

Children who play differ in size, abilities, endurance, preferences and other characteristics. In this context, to be fair to my playmate, I need to step into his/her shoes, treat him/her according to his/her—not my—needs and wishes. For example, when two children play fighting, the physically weaker child may hit the stronger child as hard as he/she can, and this is fully acceptable; the opposite wouldn’t be.

And why would I want to be fair to my playmate? Since play is by definition a free and voluntary activity, every player has the freedom to quit. If you and I are playing, and I’m not taking your wishes and needs into consideration, you’re very likely to quit. But I’m here to play; I don’t want to be “left alone and sad!” An educator in MD explains: *“I was an elementary school teacher in a public school on an island and children would play ‘mosque’ in the schoolyard. They were not divided into age groups. I noticed that the rules were somewhat changing for a first-grader, so I asked a sixth-grader: ‘Why don’t you tell Giannis that he’s out? He was hit by the ball!’ Her answer opened a new window in my way of thinking: ‘For Giannis, everything is ‘hunky-dory.’ At that very moment, it was more important for Giannis to continue playing than for the rules to be strictly applied. And this was not unfair to anyone: When Giannis would be ready, he would start playing by the same rules—he would actually pursue it himself. For the time being, it was more important for the play to continue.”*

For Peter Gray, **fairness in free play does not come from thinking that we are all the same, but from recognizing and respecting our differences. In play, children learn to recognize and respect diversity.**

9.2. Evidence from our pedagogical reflection on play

We started our journey in MD as fervent supporters of free play. We presumed that the preschool-age children we'd accompany would automatically build relationships with each other through play. Now, while we remain fervent supporters of free play, we have observed that children from diverse cultural backgrounds, who simply meet in a common framework, do not necessarily prefer to play with each other.

The following "incident," which unfolded over the course of several months, is indicative: a group of "local" children were particularly prone to organizing improvisational role play, which contained a great deal of imagination. Through dialogue in Greek, children would constantly create new circumstances that twisted the plot. As a pedagogical team, we admired their play, but were concerned about the non-participation of children with a different mother tongue. So, we attempted to include some non-Greek speaking children in the role play. We tried out different approaches, such as getting involved as players ourselves, guiding the play in a more interlingual direction, or "accompanying" the play, making sure that the new children would understand and be able to communicate.

When collectively reflecting on these interventions, we were never satisfied. We realized that, once we are involved, the children understood what we expect of them. And because, broadly speaking, it was important for them that we like them, they let us alter their play. But did they put their heart and soul into it? Could the new arrangement be considered "play," or was play destroyed, since it could no longer evolve in the way the players wanted? Were children involved in similar processes of inclusion when we were not around? Finally, did we provoke

quite the opposite effect, for example the confirmation of the stereotype that the newcomers "didn't understand"⁹?

Since then, we have tried to let children's free play evolve, trusting that, while playing, children try out, learn and process themselves and their relationships. At the same time, we started offering daily organized activities with voluntary participation¹⁰, which provided opportunities for shared experiences. In the long term, we observed more intercultural interactions taking place during free play.

In this way, games and board games were used, invented or tailored to fit our multicultural team¹¹. The necessary requirements were: to be "playable" regardless of mother tongue, to be governed by rules that all children would understand, not to reproduce stereotypes and not to foster competition.

⁹ In their research, Van Audade and Feagin (Magos 2022: 69) observe that young children often hide what they truly think from adults, if they feel they will displease them. They describe that, in terms of addressing diversity, there exist three parallel worlds in a kindergarten setting:

- a) **The world of adults**, which includes the respective interactions among adults.
- b) **The shared world of adults and children**. As adults, we are constantly conveying messages regarding the management of diversity, without necessarily realizing it.
- c) **The world of children**. Children, without adult supervision, manage issues of diversity as they wish.

Would we wish to control this third world, too? Even if we wanted to (we don't), we can't! We can, however, be sure that the interactions that take place there are directly related to everything that happens in the two aforementioned worlds.

¹⁰ *"Given the freedom to choose what they want to do, children are also free, i.e. they have the space and time, to recognize their needs."*

¹¹ We have documented some of them in MD's booklet *Adventures in the Forest*.

The latter acquires additional interest in the context of intercultural encounter. **Can I form an equal relationship with the “other,” when I am urged to compete with them?** Let's not forget that competition, a key element of "western civilization," varies across cultures, with some placing greater emphasis on collectivity and cooperation (Magos 2022: 75, 469).

9.3. Humor in pedagogics

We have seen humor act as a powerful link between children and us, as well as among children, often on an intercultural level. According to Jiang et al., **humor fosters a sense of intimacy and relaxation** (2019: 5): *"humor is the basic tool that I use to help children feel comfortable. If you manage to make children laugh, you have managed to help them unwind,"* says an educator in MD. It also **reduces stress and tension** (2019: 5): *"in MD, we generally found ourselves in a pleasant atmosphere with numerous difficulties. In many intense moments, using humor helped us avoid pressure and decompress."* Lastly, humor **improves our self-image and our relationship with others and increases one's sense of belonging** (2019: 5): *"when laughing, two or more people express common feelings. Recognizing an emotion and realizing that others share that same emotion, just like when we laugh together or we are happy for the same reason, automatically establishes a connection."*

Peter Gray sees humor and play as powers that can prevent aggression, dominance and hierarchy. *"Humor is a key component in MD: laughing, making jokes, teasing each other in a good-natured way. In schools, this is often missing. There is a seriousness that we adults have incorporated into our daily lives, which we want to pass on to children. Humor is a great tool. It's a nice feeling, a way of dealing with a difficult or an awkward situation. Humor is also a transformation, a perspective from which one sometimes chooses to view life."*

We acknowledge that humor is not always beneficial¹². Magos calls on teachers to take immediate action whenever children use it as a means of oppressive power, insult or belittlement (2022: 198). After all, **humor clearly has a cultural dimension**, which we are invited to explore guided by our intercultural competence. So, let's combine humor with empathy!

¹² The four dimensions of humor are quite widespread in theory—affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive and self-defeating humor (Martin et. al. 2003).

10. Summing up

This text is an attempt to share values and tools that have accompanied us on a process of discovery along with young children of different ethnic origins and backgrounds. We do not claim to have succeeded in creating a cohesive intercultural team; we have, however, taken steps in this direction. Parts of this narrative could prove useful to teams or individuals engaged in similar endeavors.

What can help educators who accompany multicultural groups of children? How can we deal with the issue of different mother tongues within a group? What roles can nature, play and humor play in our intercultural encounters? Ultimately, how do we cultivate our intercultural competence? One thing is certain: **by not ceasing our conscious, joint effort to this end.**

In closing, we dedicate Mikros Dounias' illustrated, intercultural music album "Lullabies of the world¹³" to everyone who has managed to read this far! With our best of wishes for physical and mental journeys and creative, enriching intercultural routes.

¹³ You can listen to the music at www.mikrosdounias.bandcamp.com

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