

# Producing and disseminating marginalized knowledge through students' drawings, videos and crafts

**Eleni Katsarou and Konstantinos Sipitanos**

*Can multimodality contribute to the social inclusion of all students and to fostering of a democratic culture in educational settings characterized by major population movements and relevant social changes that usually promote racism and exclusion? In this paper, we argue that multimodality, especially its social semiotic approach (Kress, 1995, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2005), is not just another necessary addendum to the curriculum for “new learning” (adjusted to the needs of contemporary societies and new technologies). More importantly, it can offer democratic ways to produce, distribute and disseminate knowledge. Having worked with the Knowledge Democracy initiative (Sousa Santos, 2018) in an Erasmus+ Project called Backpack-ID, developed as a bottom-up innovation in participating schools, we demonstrate, through specific examples, that the students' drawings and digital storytelling can create prospects for social inclusion for all students in the classroom. More specifically, we try to show, in detail and through instances of practice, how a classroom, as a multi-semiotic space, can become a democratic space founded on the inclusion of diverse histories, memories, languages, identities and epistemologies.*

KEYWORDS                      multimodality, multimodal literacy, multiliteracies, knowledge  
democracy, students' social inclusion, narratives, digital storytelling.

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we argue that multimodality can offer a democratic way to produce, distribute and disseminate knowledge in educational settings. Through the combination of multimodal literacies (Kress 2003; Jewitt & Kress 2003; Cope & Kalantzis 2000) with the Knowledge Democracy initiative (Sousa Santos 2018) and the politicization of the concept of multimodal-

ity we propose, new perspectives for this venture can emerge. Our basic aim is - drawing on theories in the field of multimodal communication from a social semiotic perspective and using relevant conceptualizations of communication and representation- to democratize knowledge production and dissemination processes in school. Besides, through specific examples from educational practice, we try to show that the students' drawings and digital storytelling can constitute inclusive and democratic ways of producing and disseminating knowledge. We focus on how a multimodal semiotic approach can be applied to educational practice to allow inclusion of all voices in contemporary classrooms, contexts of diversity and difference. So the paper is about the politics of representation, the politics of knowledge and the politics of difference in multicultural and multilingual classrooms.

We consider such a study and discussion important as it is in the core of democratic pedagogy. It can propose practices that give voice and opportunity for participation to all students, even marginalized ones, which are muted due to language restrictions, racism, or exclusion. Mapping how teachers and students actively work with modes and multimodality in their classrooms is usually conducted aiming at offering a better understanding of the relationship between modes, pedagogy and learning, and examining what multimodality has to offer to improve learning (Stein 2008; Kalantzis & Cope 2008; de Silva Joyce & Feez 2018). Yet this kind of research does not appear to illustrate multimodality as a pedagogic resource for social inclusion in school, which is the basic aim of this study.

The basic principles of the proposed combination of multimodal literacies with knowledge democracy, were applied to "Backpack-ID", an Erasmus+ Project where teachers and students from four European countries facing the refugee crisis (Greece, Italy, Germany and Sweden) collected the students' family and personal stories as these were expressed through videos, drawings and crafts in their heritage languages and/or in the language of the reception country. These stories were converted to digital format, e-book and video, and translated in five languages (the languages of the four participating countries, plus English). The students' voices, expressed through drawings, crafts (e.g. identity maps) and videos, their choice of colors, photos, special fonts, diagrams, and all their choices in general, shaped the entire project and defined the interventions conducted in participating schools. Working together, teachers and academic researchers helped students to disseminate knowledge produced in various communities (their families, friends, etc.) and provided support throughout the procedure, aware of the power issues raised by this project, whereby not all participants shared the same goals and aspirations.

In the sections below, we propose the combination of multimodal literacy and knowledge democracy, after outlining how we perceive these two frameworks. We believe that this combination can lead teaching to adopting inclusive and democratic practices. To support this claim, we present examples of teaching activities implemented during the Backpack-ID project, accompanied by students' and teachers' comments that provided constant feedback.

Our discussion on these examples highlights the potential value of the proposed combination, while also stressing possible risks.

## **2. Multimodal approaches to representation and multimodal literacy in education**

Multimodality is a concept that has been perceived and utilized in various ways and in different disciplines. Here, following the work of Kress (1995, 2009), Kress & van Leeuwen (2006, 2001) and van Leeuwen (2005), we adopt a *social semiotic approach* to multimodality. This means extending the social interpretation of language and its meanings to the whole range of modes of representation and communication employed in a culture. Bezemer and Jewitt (2010) highlight three theoretical assumptions as central to this approach:

a. representation and communication always draw on a multiplicity of modes, all of which contribute to meaning. Social semiotics focuses on describing the full repertoire of meaning-making resources which people use in different contexts (e.g. actional, visual, spoken, gestural, written, three-dimensional, and others), and on developing means that show how these are organized to make meaning.

b. all forms of communication (modes) have been shaped through their cultural, historical and social uses to realize social functions. All communicational acts are socially constructed and meaningful to the social environments in which they were created.

c. the meanings realized by any mode are always interwoven with the meanings made with those other modes co-presenting and co-operating in the communicative event. This interaction produces meaning. Multimodality focuses on people's processes of meaning making, a process in which people make choices from a network of alternatives.

Communication –as a multimodal act- is rather fluid and complicated, as it is based on signs socially produced and socially read. What signs stand for and how they are read is not static, pre-given or pre-determined, but affected by how people regulate semiotic resources in their social context of use. The sign-maker engages in acts of sign-making expressing his/her “interested action”. This term refers to the fact that signs are never neutral but infused with the sign-maker's interests that are affected by the interests of the social groups the sign-maker is part of. Social semiotics acts are determined by the sign-maker's interests, capacities of creativity and constraints and possibilities offered by the formative role of structures in the context in which the meaning-making occurs. Sign-makers produce and read designs (NLG 1996; Cope & Kalantzis 2000), through a dynamic process of (re)designing signs in response to other signs. This view implies that signs do not have fixed meanings but acquire meaning relationally within “webs of signification” and are constantly transformed (Pahl & Rowsell 2006: 8).

A multimodal approach to teaching and learning characterizes communication in the classroom beyond linguistic communication: language is only one mode of communication among many. Other modes can include image, drawing, space, gesture, sound, movement, etc. All these modes function to communicate meaning in an integrated, multilayered way. In such an approach, all modes of communication drawn on in the making of meaning are given equally serious attention in school (Stein 2008:1). This basic assumption of social semiotic approach is not self-evident, since history, culture and ideology have assigned particular values to specific modes, for example the superiority of writing over speech in the Western world. In the classroom, social semiotics acts can be highly constrained by current political choices and institutional structures.

In contemporary times, characterized by constant mobility of populations, the pervasiveness of new technologies, communicative fluidity and diversity in terms of (re)sources and modes, as well as their combinations used in communication, new literacies are needed. The new, complex communicative landscape highlights the need for multiple competences, skills and knowledge, reorienting school goals and practices towards developing multi-literacies, understanding how different communicative modes complement each other and work together to make or add meaning (Unsworth & Thomas 2014). The concept of multiliteracies is not formulaic; it involves “a different set of perceptual systems of reading, where separate communicative modes are employed and separate literacies are enacted” (Duncum 2004: 253). In this context, literacy teaching aims at nurturing the students’ abilities and skills necessary for understanding and producing various text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies (NLG 1996), generally combining different semiotic modes to make meaning. Possessing a range of literacies (e.g. visual literacy, techno-literacy, etc.), today’s “multiliterate” subject reads multimodal texts in an integrated fashion, noting the relationship between different semiotic modes used, and produces multimodal texts, “designs”, managing various resources (Kress 1995).

Both frameworks (multimodality and multiliteracies) are founded on notions of justice, democracy and equity in society and in education (Newfield 2011a,b). They tackle the question of linguistic hegemony (of language *per se*) and argue for a literacy education that is plural in terms of both culture and representational practices, premised upon the existence of local and global literacies and their interconnectedness in today’s world. The skill of “negotiating difference” (cultural, social, linguistic, semiotic) is a major educational goal for multiliteracies. Multimodal social semiotics approaches issues of diversity and democracy through a semiotic route: it holds that a socially just education should take account of the range of meaning-making possibilities and scenarios that exist in the current communicational landscape and in the communities of learners, in local and indigenous contexts, including classrooms.

Multimodality and multiliteracies propose pedagogies, multimodal pedagogies (Stein 2008: 121-22) that recognize that the use of modes in classrooms is always the effect of the

work of culture, history and power in shaping materials into resources for meaning-making. Pedagogic processes (e.g. designing of texts) are understood as the selection and configuration of the semiotic resources available in the classroom. Textual practice is placed within a human rights framework: democratic education should neither outlaw nor ignore the resources of students and their communities for learning and representation. Semiotic freedom is a human right. Multimodal pedagogies acknowledge learners as active participants in domestic and community life, as human beings who have rights, resources, creativity, opinions, judgment and agency (Stein 2008: 42, 31). Learners engage with different modes differently: they have different relationships, histories and competences in relation to modes. Multimodality gives students the opportunity to make a range of representations constructing a multi-perspectival view of the world that gives emphasis on the insider perspective, from “real people who experience it”. These representations can crush the boundaries between spaces “inside” school, like official school culture or dominant discourses, and those “outside”, like local community culture. The conscious use of multimodality frees up the creative space for students: a. to explore a range of different voices in different modalities, b. to use elements from their local communities (languages, memories, culture, etc.) to produce knowledge in the classroom expressed in various modes, and c. to disseminate knowledge produced through different modes which can reach a range of audiences and contexts. In other words, multimodal pedagogies encourage complex, creative and varied practices of design and meaning-making in classroom that are counter-hegemonic.

Here we draw on conceptualizations of multimodality that strongly connect it with multiliteracies in a socio-political way, focusing on the acceptance of differences, the expression of multiple voices (Garcia et al. 2018) and fostering critical learning and democracy in the classroom. This socio-political view of multimodality highlights the need to equip students, not only with technical skills for dealing with new technologies, but also with the abilities and knowledge necessary for analyzing and critically evaluating different views, as well as for voicing diverse and divergent perspectives to large audiences (Gainer 2012). In such a context, “literacy is about more than reading and writing – it is about how we communicate in society. It is about social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture... Literacy takes many forms: on paper, on the computer screen, on TV, on posters and signs. Those who use literacy take it for granted – but those who cannot use it are excluded from much communication in today’s world. Indeed, it is the excluded who can best appreciate the notion of *literacy as freedom*” (UNESCO Statement for the United Nations Literacy Decade, 2003-20). And this freedom refers to rights such as access to knowledge, the right to be different and the power to bring social transformations.

### 3. What is knowledge democracy?

As mentioned above, without a clear socio-political orientation, multimodality can lead to technocratic teaching activities. We argue that such an orientation can be provided through Knowledge democracy (henceforth KD), an initiative that is not only compatible with, but also complementary to multimodality, as we attempt to demonstrate below.

KD focuses on producing, disseminating and utilizing knowledge, both in society in general and in education in particular (Rowell & Hong 2017). It criticizes strictly controlled environments and systems that legitimize a certain form of knowledge (particularly academic knowledge produced and disseminated at a distance from real people and their everyday lives) and only promote specific forms of its representation. Contrary to dominant perception, the society envisioned by KD attributes a central role to social actors, who produce, evaluate and criticize knowledge (Feldman & Bradley 2019), so as to utilize it in their decision making, whether personal or public (in 't Veld 2010).

As KD actually constitutes a struggle for social and cognitive justice (Sousa Santos 2007), it involves diverse communities of problem solving, democratic imagination in a non-market, non-competitive world, including a collaboration of memories, legacies, heritages, a manifold heuristics of problem solving, where a citizen takes both power and knowledge into his [or her] own hands" (Visvanathan 2009). The concept of the "pluriverse" (Escobar 2015), comprising a multiplicity of mutually entangled and co-constituting but distinct worlds, is also strongly connected with KD and epistemological diversity. It involves more than simply tolerating difference; it implies actually understanding that reality consists of many worlds, and in fact many kinds of worlds, many ontologies, many ways of being, many ways of perceiving reality and experimenting with these worlds in practice (Querejazu 2016). It is not sufficient to identify epistemological and ontological diversity; they should also influence everyday practices, perceptions and discourse. In the KD framework, the pluriverse concept changes the catastrophic, Eurocentric notion of one world metaphysics (Law 2015), bringing together elements from many worlds in order to unite them (Escobar 2015).

Moreover, KD criticizes the usual role of institutionalized education (school and university), challenging the mono-ontological approach it proposes, whereby experts promote knowledge through sophisticated techniques (Hall 1992) and determine what knowledge is and how it is produced. According to KD, university experts need to transform their perceptions of research and their rigorous methodology, in order to achieve adequate communication with the participants in the social situation under study, gain a better understanding of the local context (Bourke, 2013; Jordan, 2009) and empower participants to undertake social action. Universities need not treat participants as objects of research, but as subjects who participate equally (Katsarou & Sipitanos 2019). Such a reorientation of research would affect the definition of knowledge and the procedures of producing and disseminating knowledge in school.

In school, KD refers to (Rowell & Hong, 2017):

1. How the world is presented (forms of legitimized knowledge, types of available and accessible knowledge),
2. Activities involving teachers and students, with regard to learning about the world (research and teaching methodologies),
3. Procedures of creating knowledge in the school,
4. Procedures of disseminating knowledge (in the classroom, local communities, groups of interest, etc.),
5. How teachers and students get involved in social and transformative action.

First of all, KD in school entails legitimizing knowledge that comes to the school or classroom from various sources, including the students' communities, creating a pluriverse with multiple realities, not just the one validated by the curricula or the Ministry textbooks. Therefore, KD relates to knowledge characterized by hybrid and plural possible "truths".

Regarding the second point, KD promotes teaching and learning methods that are based on the students' experiences and their reflections on these experiences (Suarez 2017). For instance, it involves narratives representing experiences, reflection and dialogue on these narratives, which can shed light on the students' implicit assumptions and help them problematize their current understandings. Inquiry-based activities, use of ethnography and sociolinguistics as teaching tools (Egan-Robertson & Bloome 2000) and written or multimodal accounts, auto-biographical or metaphorical, can also be used (Burchell & Dyson 2000). In fact, every opportunity to highlight and honor the students' out-of-school literacies could be used in such a context.

Whatever kind of knowledge is produced in school, whether content or procedural or knowledge about teaching and learning, the quality of interaction and communication among participants (e.g. teachers, students, parents, university researchers) is crucial for the knowledge production process, as knowledge is produced through cooperating and collaborating with others. Therefore, equal participation, horizontal relations and democratic decision-making among participants are essential. Regarding knowledge dissemination, and taking into account today's information and communication technologies, issues of audience and criteria for publication are very important and have to be debated at every stage. Teachers and students make decisions on how and with whom to share their work (Katsarou & Sipitanos 2019).

#### **4. Connecting multimodality to KD: potential implications for teaching**

Our main argument here is that teaching multimodality in text reading and production,

and encouraging the use of various modes for the expression of various and pluralistic views, experiences, heritages, memories, etc., can foster democracy both in and out of the classroom, through the dissemination of knowledge produced in school. This means that multimodality can create an environment where diverse voices can be heard (apart from the voices dominant in the present educational system); various experiences can be expressed in multiple ways and through various modes (including personal, family and community experiences usually excluded from school); interaction and cooperation between stakeholders can be improved in the classroom; and, teachers and students can show initiative to take action (educational, social, etc.), as informed citizens. The underlying vision is that of citizens who think critically, take a stance on complicated social issues, have a strong sense of community, are deeply committed to work for the civic good and collaborate to solve problems in an increasingly globally connected world.

The combination of multimodality with the principles of KD can lead to specific educational practices. According to Stein (2008), in order to create a democratic and versatile classroom, educators must encourage expression through various modes, building on the vast range of resources brought by the students. Moreover, they can encourage dissemination of the text created. Multimodal texts can easily reach worldwide audiences through the internet and technological applications (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). When used appropriately in school, these technological tools can be empowering, as they allow ordinary, often marginalized, people (students) to become producers and disseminators of culture (Kellner & Share 2009). This means that teachers utilize multimodality in productive, expressive and creative ways that undermine the student deficit model, drawing on the students' everyday experiences and their existing, though suppressed, capacities and genres of representation. Multimodality can turn into an opportunity for students to engage in activities that involve drawing on local forms of knowledge and semiotic practices, in order to explore and share aspects of their everyday experiences. If these experiences and activities are integrated into curricular topics, the classroom can become a forum for exchanging ideas, experiences, knowledge and cultures, providing students with mutual stimulation (Newfield 2011a).

Teaching multimodality is a real political choice, as it fosters participatory and democratic educational processes that build respect, dignity and excitement in the context of the classroom, while also developing and reinforcing the students' representational and communicative repertoires.

The fact that innovations promoting multimodality and KD in school are based on bottom-up processes, also attests to this. Processes that relate to changing educational aims, learning goals, teaching, assessment and evaluation to embrace multimodality, have to be developed at school or classroom level by teachers and students. Behind every educational change there is a hidden struggle, regarding what is chosen, how, by whom, why and to what purpose. These conflicts originate from the aims of education and, in a way, reflect divergent



answers to the question, ‘whose knowledge is more valuable, that of teachers, students, parents or the educational authorities?’ In educational innovation, the bottom-up model seems particularly democratic, as it is characterized by a focus on the school and the local conditions affecting the change, the belief that the school is the right venue for change, a keen interest in meeting local needs, the collaboration in and across schools, and systematic monitoring and review of the project itself.

In the following sections, we attempt to show how the project implements this in practice, combining multimodality with KD.

## **5. The Backpack-ID Erasmus+ Project: combining multimodality with KD in educational practice**

The Backpack-ID Erasmus+ project titled “Never leave your backpack behind” is a three-year project, funded by the European Union, which started on September 2017. Its intellectual outputs include an e-book and videos from the four participating countries: Greece, Italy, Germany and Sweden<sup>4</sup>. These outputs are educational materials that can be used in various ways in every classroom. The e-book and related videos are based on narratives collected from refugee, immigrant and native students, uploaded in digital form on the site of the project: <http://backpackid.eu>. The material is translated in the languages of the participating countries, as well as English. The project is still in progress, while an anthology from the implementation of the materials in practice, and the teacher’s toolkit will be produced next year and uploaded on the site in 2020.

Backpack-ID is an innovative educational intervention for promoting the inclusion of refugee children at school in European countries (Greece, Italy, Germany and Sweden), which face acute and very diverse challenges regarding the ongoing refugee crisis (eurostat 2019). The project views the social inclusion of refugee children as a means for addressing the needs and perspectives of those children and their families, as well as of local communities and stakeholders, while affirming common European values. This multidisciplinary project is based on social and developmental psychology, linguistics, and educational theory and practice. At the same time, it brings together academic expertise and valuable experience and know-how from educational organizations, international educational networks and NGOs.

The project focuses mainly on multiple collective belongings, memberships, backgrounds and identities of secondary school students. Addressing both refugee and non-refugee students, it seeks to empower all students and help them discern and experience aspects of “otherness” in themselves. The students’ families, their immediate social background, and/or their communi-

---

<sup>4</sup> The initial partner from Germany left at the beginning of the Project and was recently replaced by another organization. Although the new partner has already produced all necessary multimodal material, this material is not yet published, which is why we have not included any example from Germany in this paper.

ties will be their main resources to this end. “Never leave your backpack behind” refers to trivial belongings of great emotional and symbolic value that refugees may carry in their backpacks; it serves as common ground in the quest for “pathways” and “bridges” across group memberships and identities. The backpack metaphor is used, as the project is based on the general idea of transition. This transition is not only from one place to another, but also from one phase of life to another, for instance from primary to secondary education, from student life to marriage, from the village to the city. It is a common idea, an experience shared by all humans. Importantly, the reflective work on identities further seeks to advance the literacy development of refugee students in the new language. This integrative approach to multiple identities, empowerment and literacy development is the core innovative contribution of Backpack-ID.

Regarding teaching practices, teachers are free to develop their own practices during the project, tailored to their students’ profiles and needs. They are also encouraged to discuss, change and even challenge part of the project theory. Through weekly skype meetings, the teachers started discussing how they perceived the basic theoretical concept of the project, “multiple identities”, how it can be implemented in educational practice, which problems they faced in the classroom, related challenges and possible solutions. The academic researchers provided the teachers with space to reflect, posing reflective questions to help them understand the main idea of the project, enhancing the students’ multiple identities, and attribute the meaning that is important to them at local level.

As mentioned above, the project has a solid theoretical base (fluid and multiple identities and how they intersect), predetermined basic goals and specific outcomes. But its structure was also designed for bottom-up development. Instead of viewing the basic project concepts (e.g. multiple identities, common European values, etc.) and/or activities (collection of family stories or personal narratives) as an imposed set of restrictive regulations, participants have the opportunity to address project characteristics in a creative way, attributing meanings that have value for them and addressing the needs and perspectives of refugee and non-refugee students, local communities and stakeholders, in a common account of social inclusion challenges.

In the following section we present some examples, developed and implemented by project participants, showing the diversity of created practices. In all cases, the practices brought together the teachers’ educational practices, the students’ needs and the local context.

## **6. Connecting multimodal narratives of Backpack-ID with Knowledge Democracy: instances of practice**

As per its educational and research design, the project was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, teachers and students collected educational material (crafts, narratives, images etc.) from their local communities, both inside and outside their schools. Their mul-

timodal narratives reflected their lives, their experiences, and the memories and languages of their communities. Fifty multimodal “stories” were collected from each country. Some of them (ten from each country) were also turned into videos. Then all these materials, “stories” and videos were uploaded on the site of the project (<http://backpackid.eu/>). In the second phase, teachers and students used the material in the classroom, developing relevant activities. The site offers a platform where the teachers from the four countries exchanged ideas. In this phase, 2-5 teachers with their students (approximately 180 in total) participated from each country, producing 10 lesson plans and 3 students’ artifacts (30 per country, 90 in total, see footnote 1).

All these educational procedures were constantly monitored through various means (participants’ diaries, interviews, etc.). In the second phase, research data was collected through questionnaires answered by teachers and students that used the multimodal material in practice. In the questionnaires, teachers described and evaluated their practices (e.g. Q1: *What issues emerged during the process (for instance similarities, differences, sense of belonging in a group, multiple selves)?* Q2: *What other issues emerged and were discussed? Could you mention some of these issues?*). They also explained which of the educational material they used and why (narratives, crafts etc.). The students answered questions concerning their attitudes. They also explained by which educational material they were impressed and why (e.g. *Which activity did you find more interesting? Why? What thoughts or feelings did the scenario cause to you?*). Then the data collected was analyzed with focus on: a. the ways in which the multimodal material was perceived and used in the classroom by teachers and students, b. the prospects it created for social inclusion of all students and c. the difficulties/obstacles it created at any level.

### *6.1. Students as auto-ethnographers: taking photos and narrating stories*

Photostories constitute an empowering learning approach, since the students engage in research activities within their own community. Culture and local or family history become the resources for meaning making, for exploring and sharing aspects of life in the school context. For instance, in the junior high school (JHS) of Perama Mylopotamou, in a rural semi-mountainous area near Rethymno in central Crete, Greece, the students collected data by taking photos of their communities. Specifically, they collected photos from their villages or towns and also took photos from their daily routines (one shot per hour). In photostories, the photos taken by the students’ personal mobile phones were accompanied by the respective written descriptions and narratives (on notebooks or digital presentations. For instance, the photo of Figure 1 below was taken by a student, who connected it with the area, linking the school to its environment (“trees”, “mountain”) in the short accompanying comment. The photo was taken from the student’s point of view, so it contributes to a more personal meaning-making

procedure. Photography traits, like the angle, zoom and filters, are some of the traits that contribute to meaning making. The photo is also connected with the family story (Excerpt 1) (“my grandfather”, “my grandmother”).



**Figure 1.** Maria's grandparents' school

(Excerpt 1) *The other picture shows the school. It has many trees around it and there is a big mountain behind it. This school was an elementary school in the past too. [...]. This is where my grandfather and my grandmother used to go to school.*

(Maria, GR, ST3, 12 years old<sup>5</sup>).

These photostories also proved productive in the classroom, leading to new conversational circles. All photostories created were presented in the classroom, where the students, the people who had actually experienced them, gained a deeper understanding by comparing their personal, family and community stories with those of their classmates. Through these stories, the students realized that their lives are connected to nature and that all people love their homeland, no matter how small or insignificant it might seem to others.

The multimodal reading of the photos was conducted in the classroom, noting the position of certain objects in the center of the picture (tree and school) as the main information, the role of colors (e.g. green) (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996). Thus, the interpretation of the photostories took place in the community that produced them. In this way, students formulated their own meanings, instead of reproducing dominant discourses, as the school norm dictates. Subsequently, different family stories were connected with local factors, such as memories

<sup>5</sup> The student names are changed to protect their identity. The data can be identified as concerns the country (GR for Greece, SW for Swede and IT for Italy) and the participant's status (ST for Student and T for Teacher).

from the homeland, familiar landscapes, local environment, etc., bringing multiple representations into the classroom and avoiding the appearance of dominant perceptions. This connection reveals the bottom-up approach of the project, whereby teachers encouraged students to bring their family and personal stories into the classroom and then turned these multimodal stories into educational material that was studied and analyzed in class.

In these teaching activities, multimodality was connected with the students' knowledge, memories and languages, leading to a stronger connection with the local social and natural context, promoting social semiotics in educational settings. Furthermore, the students disseminated their stories, values and heritages to the other members of the school community. In this way, the students had the opportunity to engage in activities that included learning from each other, building knowledge in a more multidirectional way, where the scaffolding (Wood, Bruner & Ross 1976) is provided not only by the teachers, but also by all the students, due to their different sociocultural backgrounds (Mercer 2000).

According to the teachers' questionnaire answers (e.g. "Generation Vs Generation" or "I miss") photostories constituted educational material that was widely used. As it concerns the pedagogical processes, through this complex meaning making procedure the students started to change the way they conceived reality. A student from Italy stated: "I understood that people might be foreigners in their country or feel well everywhere" (It.St.5), discovering subsequent realities, beyond monomodal and mono-ontological conceptions.

## *6.2. Students as auto-ethnographers: taking interviews and transcribing family stories - Drawing transition stories*

Backpack-ID also promoted oral storytelling, which was combined by drawing. For instance a student in Sweden, after taking interviews and asking information from his family members, produced the following story as a final result

(Excerpt 2). The story was accompanied by his drawing (Figure 2).

(Excerpt 2). *My name is Ninos and I come from Iran. My parents chose my name. I wanted the name Mohammad because it's a prophet's name that I like. There are not so many called. Me, my brother and my mother moved to Sweden with the help of the UN. I am 12 years old and went to school in Iran. There were always a lot of conflicts occurred in Iran. The pupils roared, the teacher and the principal were not good at school. I had my fruit with me at school on my school bench. Moving from Iran was tough because my mother missed her mother. There are differences between me and my classmates here in Sweden. Some are happy and happy and some miss their dad in their lives. My brother worked as a mechanic. We moved because the UN moved us. I was worried about my mom. It was really hard to say goodbye to my grandmother. I missed my uncle.*

*Mom has memories of grandmother and my dad who passed away. In Iran, I used to go to the gym and at home I practiced boxing.*

(Ninos, SW, ST4, Linköping's Kommun, 12 years old)



**Figure 2.** Ninos' drawing - Personal transition from Iran to Sweden

The stories collected helped students gain a deeper understanding of the historical factors that shaped the lives of their family members. In the classroom, further questions were posed and discussed, for instance the reasons why Ninos left Iran, why he insisted on that name, what is happening in Iran. The discussion raised further issues and the voices of the families created a chain of dialogue across generations, enhancing polyphony<sup>6</sup> (Bakhtin 1981). In these stories, reality was presented by several participants that communicated and cooperated in knowledge production and dissemination. Heritages, stories and traditions were negotiated through the dialogic practices that took place.

Furthermore, the student Ninos was not held back by linguistic features, taking into account that, as a newcomer, his access to Swedish is limited. Through his picture, he combined different semiotic resources to promote his story. In Figure 2, emoticons and the feelings they express are a powerful resource, due to the powerful communicative tools such as Instagram and Facebook. The teachers did not reject this resource and this semiotic freedom gave Ninos' story the opportunity to be heard.

Identity maps also became a powerful multimodal activity, as various forms of communication co-exist in them (Bezemer & Jewitt 2010). The students started to compare their identities, identifying similarities and differences, based on the different semiotic resources they used. For instance, even though they used different symbols for religion, they discovered that religion can be equally important for students from different socio-cultural backgrounds. These

<sup>6</sup> Polyphony: a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses (Bakhtin 1981: 6-7).

identity maps and the subsequent discussion on semiotic resources connected their lives in and out of school, as seen above. Thus the students' multiliteracies competency was enhanced, since they realized that the "same" meaning (e.g. religion) can be constructed through different signs, depending on differences in culture, history and ideology.



**Figure 3.** Identity map. Each ray of the sun depicted here ends in a symbol that reflects the student's home country, India and his religion, Sikh.

Through this teaching activity, the students used different modes to express, for the same subject, multiple worlds and multiple ontologies about the world (Escobar 2015), in the context of the current refugee crisis. All these multiple modes produced multiple knowledges through the development of relationships. In other words, through this relational ontology, where the students' drawings were produced, multimodality facilitated their engagement and equal participation in the educational and social context. Such activities enhanced knowledge democratization, because students focused on the multiple processes of meaning making. A student stated: "I put myself in someone else's shoes and I understood what it means to feel a stranger. In this way achieved new experiences" (IT. ST.9).

There were also stories without drawings or photos from the students. For these stories, a teacher from Greece, who worked with both refugees and non-refugees stated: "There was a difficulty that had to do with their lack of adequacy in Greek (some of them had only been in Greece for a few months), and some kids with immigrant background seemed negative in connecting themselves with a difficult transition story". From this statement, it is clear that having the full repertoire and all forms of communication (Bezemer & Jewitt 2010) in our contemporary societies is not just a matter of educational adequacy; it is a political issue, because mono-ontological and monolingual approaches are a barrier in communication fluidity, raising equality issues.



### 6.3. Connecting the multimodal material produced with the official school curricula

In all participating countries, connecting the Backpack-ID educational material with the official curricula was a challenge for the teachers. Various teaching activities took place, connecting the project multimodal material with different school subjects (First/Second Language, Geography, Music etc.)<sup>7</sup>. Due to space limitations, only one example will be presented here, taken from a class in Ancient Greek History.

In the 1st grade of a JHS in Rethymno, students were asked to collect transition family stories like the ones mentioned above and design these transitions on a map. The official curriculum of the same class in History includes the Iron Age Migrations. During these migrations, which took place in the 12th century BC, the inhabitants of Greece traveled from the mainland to Asia Minor. Greek Colonization, from mainland Greece to the Mediterranean and Black Sea, took place from the 8th to 6th century BC. All these transitions were also tracked on the map.

Furthermore, due to the current financial crisis, Greece faces a “brain drain”. Highly educated men and women, aged 25-45, travel abroad to find employment that reflects their qualifications. Relevant articles, stories and hypertexts (e.g. YouTube videos, Instagram posts) were also collected from the internet by the students of the same class, while all these transitions were also tracked on maps.

Iron Age migrations (12 <sup>th</sup> century BC)	Greek Colonization (9 <sup>th</sup> -6 <sup>th</sup> century BC)	20 <sup>th</sup> - 21 <sup>st</sup> century	21 <sup>st</sup> century
Ancient Greece	Ancient Greece	From various countries and areas immigrants come to Greece	Brain drain - highly educated people leave Greece

**Table 1.** Transitions in history

With the help of maps, the intertextual reading (Table 1) connected these historical events, despite their temporal distance. By identifying the similarities and differences between these different time periods, students gained a deeper understanding of the social factors that shape our lives over time. Through such educational activities, facts that are distant to the students, as they occurred more than 3,000 years ago, become meaningful to them, as they relate to similar behaviors that occur today. This teaching activity began a second round of discussion, where the students started sharing related family stories. Immigrants and non-immigrants started sharing their mobility maps, realizing that mobility and not stability is the rule in human history and everyday family and personal stories.

Similar curricular interventions took place in several countries and the Backpack’s edu-

<sup>7</sup> For relevant ideas see: <http://backpackid.eu/el/e-book/instructions-for-teachers>



cational material was integrated in everyday school life. Music was one of the favorite subjects that helped students promote their meaning making. Favorite lyrics, sound, pitch, rhythm and familiar practices like contests or challenges became the multimodal common ground where connection between the different cultures was forged (e.g. <http://backpackid.eu/en/videos-multimedia/students-videos/849-guess-the-song>). In all countries, similar activities took place and students stated: “it was very interesting because this is how I feel about music. I like expressing myself, my point of view and my feeling through music” (SW. ST. 13). In Italy, music activities were combined with acting and teachers embraced these activities: “I tried to involve more music and acting in our lessons!”

#### *6.4. From new literacies and video production to social justice*

The students’ drawings and collages mentioned above were combined with their oral narratives. Their voices were transcribed and combined with their artifacts. This approach implements the “students’ voice” concept in praxis, since their voice transfers their own personal and family stories in the educational context.

Some of these oral narratives were collected and transformed into videos. In some cases, different stories were connected through creative writing and video editing. These mixed stories became another, more complex, multimodal literacy activity for the students. For instance, in the school region of Collecchio Emilia-Romagna in Italy, these multimodal practices enhanced communication through poly-semiotic approaches like videos<sup>8</sup>. Music, sound, body language and voice intonation form part of the language of the young, helping them express themselves in their way. Meaning was created through visual, gestural, spatial and audio modes. On the other hand, this intertextual mix of stories created new, hybrid texts, through which the students reconstructed meaning. In this case, the students acted as producers of meaning, while, in the classroom, the teachers had the opportunity to enhance the students’ understanding of intertextuality and hybridity, through the multiple forms of knowledge brought to the school and combined by the students. In this teaching practice, students become producers of culture, realizing that the world can be presented in different ways and modes. Comparing the videos among countries in the second phase, the students realized easily that each sign-maker made different choices from a network of alternatives based on different sociocultural factors.

In cooperation with SERN (project partner from Italy), students from associated schools of Italy even created short movies and music challenges, using another practice familiar to the young. These approaches were adopted through a political lens, since an engaging, inclusive and socially just environment was created this way, where students felt equal and free to express their stories.

Video making proved a powerful multiliteracies practice, taking into account that video making has become a powerful mode of communication, where difference is negotiable. In a

<sup>8</sup> see: <http://backpackid.eu/el/videos-multimedia/students-videos/989-ragazze-ribelli-2-short-stories>

question to students concerning what would they suggest to improve the project, a student proposed to “collect more videos from each child talking about the place he/she lives now” (GR. ST. 16). In addition, all teachers from all countries recognized that the videos made the fluidity of communication and the “webs of significance” more plausible (“videos, texts and the scenarios were helpful”, SW. T. 2). Video making was also a teaching aim in many scenarios following the demand of digital literacies (e.g. “Teaching aim: Talking about ourselves in a variety of ways (drawings, texts, videos)”, IT. T. 1).

All videos produced by the project partners were uploaded on YouTube, while participants from different countries started a dialogue through these stories. This dialogue gave participants the opportunity to understand a plethora of discourses from diverse discourse communities. Multimodalities created a pluriverse of ideas and approaches, avoiding monolithic knowledge monopoly, where the official school curriculum restricts the students’ knowledge to a one world-world.

## 7. Conclusions

Working with refugee and non-refugee students, we realized that it is not only a matter of creating good readers of signs. Crafts, drawings, video, intonation, and pitches brought in the classroom a plethora of different voices, stories, memories and legacies. Participating teachers recognized that the dynamic of these web-associations of signs enhanced communication beyond linguistic barriers and simultaneously connected meaning with sociocultural factors. Furthermore, students discovered that our world is not a one world-world. Map identities, vlogs, and photo stories created an alternative space where music, personal interests and family stories created a polyphonic canvas where a Pluriverse of ideas, feelings and thoughts were shared, in an environment of tolerance and acceptance.

Through the Backpack-ID project, we realized that the educational material produced, the analysis made in local contexts and the critical teaching activities implemented in the participating schools enhanced the students’ participation, creating a bridge between student experiences and the school context. No longer was school a monolingual and monolithic place; it became a third space (Li Wei 2011), where trans-languaging through multimodalities, such as images, drawings, charts, voices and sounds, promoted a more equal world. Multimodality empowered students, overcoming the student deficit model, since all students, whether refugees or not, whether eloquent in the host language or not, felt free to express themselves and disseminate their transition stories across their school community. Students shared their personal and family stories with their teachers, who commented on them and turned them into educational material. Through such activities, multimodality created strong connections between students, teachers, families and local communities. It became a ‘common’ language that facilitated the recognition of multiple worlds and knowledge. The content of the students’

stories and the related educational reflective activities, based on the concept of identifying the differences and similarities that connect all humans, helped students understand that our world consists of multiple worlds. For instance, by describing their everyday life, the students realized that, despite being local residents, they might have similarities with a newcomer from faraway places. The monolithic classroom became a pluriverse of images, voices, drawings and sounds, challenging the ways students conceive the world.

Multimodality theory offered the means to promote a more democratic knowledge production in the classrooms. The main difficulty faced by teachers in contemporary multicultural and conventional classrooms is the students' diverse linguistic and sociocultural background. Multimodality not only offered the tools to overcome these barriers, but also empowered students and provided them with equitable opportunities, enhancing their participation in the learning activities organized in the classroom. The project's political choice of using multimodality in a specific sociocultural and historical context was further enhanced by assigning students the researching role of (auto) ethnographers. This role was accompanied by the students' active participation, through the navigation, design, interpretation and analysis of texts in a more interactive way (Serafini 2010), a condition that led them to democratic knowledge production and dissemination.

One of the dilemmas often faced in such educational activities is whether it is necessary to use metalanguage. On one hand, it seems that metalanguage has a positive impact on teaching multimodal texts (Papadopoulou et al. 2019). But on the other hand, metalanguage is connected with a systematic and technical language (Unsworth 2006), which can in fact exclude populations. This difficulty can be overcome through educational critical activities. Refugee and non-refugee students can compare their stories, identifying similarities and differences without implementing a top-down metalanguage of exclusion.

Multimodality is neither another school subject nor part of a top-down curriculum. It is rather a common language, where different semiotic modes are utilized and analyzed simultaneously, together with and inside their local context and specific socio-cultural backgrounds. The proposed approach enhances the critical element that multiliteracies can offer to contemporary classrooms worldwide, particularly when combined with the basic principles of knowledge democracy.

## REFERENCES

- Bakhtin, Mikhail 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. C. Emerson and H. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bezemer, Jeff and Carey Jewitt 2010. Multimodal Analysis: Key Issues. In: Lia Litosseliti (ed.) *Research methods in linguistics*. London & New York: Continuum, 180-197.
- Bourke, Alan 2013. Universities, civil society, and the global agenda of community-engaged research. *Globalization, Societies & Education* 11(4): 498 - 519.

- Burchell, Helen and Janet Dyson 2000. Just a little story: The use of stories to aid reflection on teaching in higher education. *Educational Action Research Journal* 8 (3): 435-450.
- Cope, Bill and Mary Kalantzis 2000. *Multiliteracies. Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. London: Routledge.
- Duncum, Paul 2004. Visual Culture Isn't Just Visual: Multiliteracy, Multimodality and Meaning. *Studies in Art Education* 45 (3): 252-264.
- de Silva Joyce, Helen and Susan Feez 2018. *Multimodality Across Classrooms. Learning About and Through Different Modalities*. New York: Routledge.
- Egan Robertson, Ann and David Bloome 2003. *Students as researchers of Culture and Language in their Own Communities [IN GREEK]*. Athens: Metechmio.
- Escobar, Arturo 2015. *Thinking - feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South*. Available from: <http://www.aibr.org/antropologia/netesp/numeros/1101/110102e.pdf> [accessed January 3, 2018]
- Fairclough, Norman 1992. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Feldman, Allan and Fred Bradley 2019. Interrogating ourselves to promote the democratic production, distribution, and use of knowledge through action research. *Educational Action Research* 27(1): 91-107.
- Fine, Michelle 2018. *Just Research in Contentious Time. Widening the Methodological Imagination*. New York and London: Teachers College Press Columbia University.
- Gainer, Jesse 2012. Critical Thinking: Foundational for Digital Literacies and Democracy. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 56 (1): 14-17.
- Garcia, Antero, Allan Luke and Robyn Seglem 2018. Looking at the Next 20 Years of Multiliteracies: A Discussion with Allan Luke. *Theory Into Practice* 57(1): 72-78.
- Hall, Budd 1992. From margins to center? The development and purpose of participatory research. *The American Sociologist* 23 (4): 15-28.
- in 't Veld, Roel 2010. Towards Knowledge Democracy. In: Roel in ,t Veld (ed) *Knowledge Democracy: Consequences for Science, Politics, and Media*. New York: Springer, 1-11.
- Jewitt, Carey and Gunther Kress (eds.) 2003. *Multimodal Literacy*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Jordan, Steven 2009. From a methodology of the margins to neoliberal appropriation and beyond: The lineages of PAR. In: Dip Kapoor and Steven Jordan (eds) *Education, participatory action research, and social change: International perspectives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 15-27.
- Kalantzis, Mary and Bill Cope 2008. *New Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Katsarou, Eleni and Konstantinos Sipitanos 2019. Contemporary school knowledge democracy: possible meanings, promising perspectives and necessary prerequisites. *Educational Action Research* 27 (1): 108-124.
- Kellner, Douglas and Jeff Share 2009. Critical Media Education and Radical Democracy. In: Michael W. Apple, Wayne Au and Luis Armando Gandin (eds.) *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Education*. New York: Routledge, 281-295.

- Kress, Gunther 1995. *Writing the future: English and the making of a culture of innovation*. Sheffield: National Association for the Teaching of English.
- Kress, Gunther 2003. *Literacy in the New Media Age*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kress, Gunther 2009. What is a mode? In: Carey Jewitt (ed.) *The Routledge handbook of multimodal analysis*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 54-67.
- Kress, Gunther 2010. *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. London: Routledge.
- Kress, Gunther and Theo van Leeuwen 1996; 2<sup>nd</sup> edn 2006. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.
- Kress, Gunther and Theo van Leeuwen 2001. *Multimodal Discourse: the Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Lankshear, Colin and Michele Knobel 2006. *New Literacies: Everyday Practices and Classroom Learning*. New York: Open University Press.
- Law, John 2015. What's wrong with a one-world world? *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 16 (1): 126-129.
- Mercer, Neil 2000. *The Guided Construction of Knowledge*, [IN GREEK], Athens: Metaixmio.
- New London Group 1996. A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures. *Harvard Educational Review* 66 (1): 60-92.
- Newfield, Denise 2011a. Multimodality and children's participation in classrooms: Instances of research. *Perspectives in Education* 29 (1): 27-35.
- Newfield, Denise 2011b. Multimodality, Social Justice and Becoming a "Really South African" Democracy: Case Studies from Language Classrooms. In: Margaret Hawkins (ed.) *Social Justice Language Teacher Education*. Bristol, Buffalo & Toronto: Multilingual Matters, 23-48.
- Pahl, Kate and Jeniffer Rowsell (eds) 2006. *Travel Notes from the New Literacy Studies: Instances of Practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Papadopoulou, Maria, Sofia Gorla, Polyxeni Manoli and Evgenia Pagkourelia 2019. Developing multimodal literacy in tertiary education. *Journal of Visual Literacy* 37(4): 317-329.
- Querejazu, Amaya 2016. *Encountering the Pluriverse: Looking for Alternatives in Other Worlds*. Available from: [http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0034-73292016000200206](http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0034-73292016000200206) [accessed: July 29, 2019]
- Rowell, Lonnie and Eunsook Hong, E. 2017. Knowledge Democracy and Action Research: Pathways for the Twenty First Century. In: Lonnie Rowell, Catherine Bruce, Joseph Shosh and Margaret Riel (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of International Action Research*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 63-83.
- Serafini, Frank 2010. Reading multimodal texts: Perceptual, structural and ideological perspectives. *Children's Literature in Education* 41 (2): 85-104.
- Sousa Santos, Boaventura de 2007. *Cognitive Justice in a Global World: Prudent Knowledge for a Decent Life*. Lanham, MD: Lexington.

- Sousa Santos, Boaventura de 2018. *The end of Cognitive Empire. The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Suarez, Daniel Hugo 2017. The Narrative Documentation of Pedagogical Experiences and the Democratization of Professional Development and Schooling in Argentina. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 30 (5): 474–487
- Stein, Pipa 2008. *Multimodal Pedagogies in Diverse Classrooms: Representation, Rights and Resources*. London: Routledge.
- United Nations 2003. *United Nations Literacy decade (2003-2012) Launched at New York Headquarters*. Available from: [https://www.un.org/press/en/2003/obv322.doc.htm?fbclid=IwAR0prnSJ0\\_PqJynRBXqPtW\\_iJJGxXrXJ16rAs8E8dOCqrliYt9T83b0a6SQ](https://www.un.org/press/en/2003/obv322.doc.htm?fbclid=IwAR0prnSJ0_PqJynRBXqPtW_iJJGxXrXJ16rAs8E8dOCqrliYt9T83b0a6SQ) [accessed July 25, 2019].
- Unsworth, Len 2006. Towards a metalanguage for multiliteracies education: Describing the meaning-making resources of language-image interaction. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* 5 (1): 55-76.
- Unsworth, Len and Angela Thomas (eds.) 2014. *English Teaching and New Literacies Pedagogy: Interpreting and Authoring Digital Multimedia Narratives*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Group.
- van Leeuwen, Theo 2005. *Introducing Social Semiotics*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Visvanathan, Shiv 2009. *The search of cognitive justice*. Available from: [http://www.india-seminar.com/2009/597/597\\_shiv\\_visvanathan.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2009/597/597_shiv_visvanathan.htm) [accessed, January 30, 2018]
- Wei Li 2011. Moment Analysis and Translanguaging Space: discursive Construction of Identities by Multilingual Chinese Youth in Britain. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43 (5): 1222-1235.
- Wood, David, Jerome Bruner and Gail Ross 1976. The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 17: 89-100.

**Eleni Katsarou**, Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy and Social Studies, University of Crete, Greece.

**E-Mail:** [katsarou@uoc.gr](mailto:katsarou@uoc.gr)

**Konstantinos (Kostis) Sipitanos**, teacher in secondary education and Ph.D. candidate in the University of Crete, Greece

**E-Mail:** [sipitanoskonstant@gmail.com](mailto:sipitanoskonstant@gmail.com)