



PROMOTING CHILD RIGHTS THROUGH SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS IN DIVERSIFIED SETTINGS

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Abstract:

In recent decades, Child's Rights have increasingly become the focus of international policy, international organizations, as well as educational institutions from pre-school to higher education. This is a result of a long process of defending the Rights of the Child under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989. Education plays a key role in the learning and enjoyment of the rights of the child through the progressive acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes, aimed at developing a democratic culture. The acquisition of rights, values and skills through education can also be developed through literature, as literature educates and introduces the reader to cultural understanding and perception of identity. Literature in Greek primary school is mainly taught through Anthologies. In this vein, the aim of this study is to investigate through the thematic analysis of the anthological texts of the primary school taught to students in Greece, whether there are explicit or implicit references related to Child's Rights in their content. Three thematic networks emerge from data analysis. The first thematic network concerns the right to protection - family care and alternative care, the second concerns the right to protection from deprivation of liberty by factors that threaten the security of their country and the third concerns the right to protection from discrimination based on distinctive characteristics of individuals. Overall, the data show that there are significant references to children's rights and more specifically to that of protection. The discussion shows that the teaching of these texts should sensitize students to universal values and contemporary social problems. This will be achieved if the approach of appropriately trained teachers does not remain only at the level of knowledge but extends to the level of skills and attitudes.

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1. Introduction

The period of childhood is considered particularly important as it lays the foundations for the healthy development of the child, the basic prerequisite of which is, among other things, the recognition of the child's rights. In recent decades, child rights have increasingly become the focus of international politics, international organisations and, above all, public opinion in Western democratic societies. This is the result of a long process of claiming the rights of the child. In particular, the concept of the child and childhood in general has not existed since antiquity. They have emerged relatively recently, and indeed in the last two centuries, and this is because there have been a series of social and ideological-political developments at the global level that have taken place since the Second World War, combined with the significant action and influence exerted by great educators towards an emergence of childhood and the moral and spiritual development of children, such as Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Durkheim, Pestalozzi and others, whose purpose was to develop pedagogical methods and means to eventually achieve the formation of democratic societies (Balias, 2011).

A landmark in the history of child rights is the 1989 International Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly and has an impact on domestic education policy (Lundy, 2012). This text is the culmination of all previous actions aimed at guaranteeing children's rights, and today it is part of the national legislation of most UN member states, including Greece, which ratified it in 1992. The International Convention on the Rights of the Child consists of a total of 54 articles, in which all the rights that all children without exception should enjoy are listed and can be divided into three partly overlapping groups of rights (Banko-Bal & Guler-Yildiz, 2021; United Nations General Assembly, 1989).

In particular, the first category is protection, which includes, but is not limited to, the right to protection from violence, neglect, dangerous working conditions, treatment, armed conflict and others. The second category is that of benefits, which includes rights to health, education, welfare, information, social security and care. The third category into which child rights can be divided in the text of the Convention is that of participation, i.e., rights relating to the free expression of opinion, to participation in matters that concern them, in social life, and which can complement and overlap with the other two groups of rights. The above categorisation of rights set out in the Convention, however, has been criticised as the “protection, benefits, participation” triad is argued to promote a passive view of children, who are seen as human beings in need of protection, while lacking self-determination and autonomy, i.e., the ability to make decisions and exercise their rights (Quennerstedt, 2010).

Apart from any categorization from the drafting of the Convention to the present day, child rights should be integrated into school textbooks as they serve as a powerful tool in educating children about their rights, fostering awareness, and promoting a

culture of respect and equality (Jerome *et al.*, 2015; UNESCO, 2024; UNICEF, 2014). By embedding the principles of child rights into educational curricula, we can empower young learners to become advocates for themselves and others, driving social change and contributing to a more just and equitable society (Pitsou *et al.*, 2025). The integration of child rights in school education is not just an educational imperative but a moral one, ensuring that every child grows up aware of their intrinsic value and the protections they are entitled to under the law (Pitsou & Koios, 2025). A field of study in which they may be included in a school program is that of literature.

The promotion of rights through education can be developed through literature, as literature educates and introduces the reader to cultural understanding and the perception of identity (Kanatsouli, 2002). At the same time, it contributes to children's aesthetic, linguistic and social awareness as well as to their psycho-spiritual maturation (Katsiki-Givallou, 2007; 2008). In addition, literature could cultivate values and practices of human rights either directly or indirectly, since it could transform the impact of the reading experience into a motivation for social engagement, raising awareness and inspiring action. Furthermore, literary works could be used as a background for studying the concepts of human rights, draw attention to the inequalities existing in contemporary societies and give a voice to the voiceless (Figuemariam, 2016). For instance, works like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* played a critical role in developing the discourse around slavery in the United States and promoting the abolitionist movement. In this vein, authors like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have contributed to the promotion of African cultures and history (Naseem *et al.*, 2023).

Children's literature can and should be used to introduce and promote human rights values and the content of child's rights, even to very young children. Todres and Higinbotham (2013, p. 44) argue that *"the stories children read, like all narratives that contribute to our moral sense of the world, help children construct social expectations and frame an understanding of their own specific rights and responsibilities"*. Todres (2016), also argues that in order for children to fully realize their human rights, they first have to imagine and understand them, whereas Robichaud *et al.* (2019) support that children's literature can convey child rights discourses to children and adults, both supporting and challenging hegemonic views of children and childhoods.

In Greek primary schools, literature is taught mainly through Anthologies, which belong to the body of textbooks that cultivate attitudes, transmit values and behavioral patterns, and influence the individual's opinions, beliefs, choices and behavior (Xochellis, 2000). Moreover, the writing of the Anthologies is an outgrowth of the Interdisciplinary Unified Curriculum Framework and the Analytical Curricula (Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs, 2001), the basic principles of which are: cultivating students' skills, ensuring equal opportunities and learning possibilities for all pupils, enhancing cultural and linguistic identity in the context of a multicultural society, raising awareness of human rights, world peace and ensuring human dignity. It is worth noting that the above-mentioned principles are consistent with the philosophy of a kind of education which has human rights and the rights of the child at its core.

In light of this, this study aims to explore whether the anthology texts taught to primary school students in Greece include explicit or implicit references to children's rights, using thematic analysis.

2. Material and Methods

This study seeks to examine, through the thematic analysis of Greek primary school anthology texts, whether there are explicit or implicit references to Child Rights in their content. For this reason, the research questions to be investigated concern whether there are references to children's rights in primary school anthologies, what types of rights are projected in them and in what way (direct, indirect, positive, negative, neutral).

2.1 Defining and presenting the material to be researched: researching books in the light of children's rights

Anthology texts were first used in primary education in 1975. Initially, one issue was written for the last two grades of primary school and then (1976-1978) two more issues for the remaining grades. The supervisors of the editorial committee were M.D. Stasinopoulos and G.P. Savvidis. The new Anthologies emerged as a need to upgrade and improve school textbooks. In 2001 the Anthology "With calculation and dream" was first written for the 5th and 6th grade of primary school, while in 2006 the other two issues were also first written: the "Dolphin" (for the 1st and 2nd grade) and "The world's school" (for the 3rd and 4th grade). In this paper, the content of all three issues (students' books) was investigated (Katsiki-Givalou *et al.*, 2001a; Katsiki-Givalou *et al.*, 2006b; Tsilimeni *et al.*, 2006b).

These books were chosen for a variety of reasons. First, they are collections of literary texts and are taught in all classes of primary school, in the context of language teaching. Moreover, literature is a carrier of definitions of culture, society, media and a space of moral, political and social development of the individual (Kress, 1994). At the same time, the literary text is a complex and diverse cultural landscape and contributes to the cultivation of critical cultural literacy (Apostolidou *et al.*, 2000). Finally, literature provides various perspectives and interpretations of the world, enriches students' perception of the world, broadens the horizon of their experiences, fosters understanding of diversity and the development of tolerance.

2.2 Determination of the conditions under which the material was formed

The demand for the reform of educational goods, the concerns about the existence of textbooks, which had been applied in education since the early 1980s, the obvious cultural heterogeneity of Greek society, the consequent increase in the number of students who derive from different cultural backgrounds in schools and the international trends were some of the main factors for designing new curricula and writing new textbooks mainly in 2001. Moreover, literature occupies a special place in the culture of a people, brings the pupil into contact with cultural elements of other peoples, contributes to the development of appreciation, respect and harmonious coexistence with other people (Katsiki-Givalou

et al., 2001b; Katsiki-Givalou *et al.*, 2006b; Tsilimeni *et al.*, 2006b). The literary texts selected by the editors of the Anthologies are proposed as occasions for acquiring knowledge, reflection, inspiration and awareness of local, national and global events.

2.3 Presentation of the methodological tool

In this research, qualitative analysis and more specifically the tool of thematic analysis with the help of thematic networks was used for the examination of the research material, which constitutes an inductive analytical process and is based more on the principles of Toulmin's (1958) argumentation theory (Attride-Stirling, 2001). This method provides a methodical and systematic analysis of the material under investigation, facilitates the organization of the analysis and allows for a deep and rich exploration of the surface and deeper structures of the text (Gibbs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Boyatzis (1998) states that thematic analysis is a process of coding qualitative information and aims to reveal the understanding of a topic or the meaning of an idea rather than to resolve conflicting definitions of a problem. Three classes of themes are included: the basic theme, the organizing theme and the global theme. The basic theme relates to the simplest characteristics of the data in the text and by itself provides little information about the text. To achieve a deeper understanding of the content of the text, it should be read in relation to the other basic themes, and together they make up the second class of themes, the organizing theme. The organizing theme is a middle-class theme, which organizes the basic themes into groups of similar themes. Its role is also to augment the meaning and importance of a larger theme, which unites several organizing themes. This creates the third theme, the global theme. The global theme is a super-ordinate theme and encompasses the basic idea of the text.

Analysis by this method involves three general stages: reduction of the text, exploration of the material and completion of the exploration. In more detail, however, the literature mentions six stages. The first involves coding the material, which may be based on predefined criteria (e.g., specific words, themes) and examining the text against the coding framework. The second step involves identifying and refining themes. The third step concerns the construction of networks. That is, we take the themes that emerge from the text and assemble them into similar groups. These groups will become the thematic networks. Starting from the basic themes, we create the organizing themes, and then we arrive at the overall theme. We visualize the topics in a web-like format, and at the end we verify and refine our network. The fourth step is the description and discovery of the thematic networks, the fifth is the summary of the thematic network and the sixth is the interpretation of the network (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

2.4 Setting up thematic networks

The main theme of the research material is the rights of the child. The main areas of analysis concern the texts of the three volumes of the anthologies of the students' book. The organizing themes that emerged from the analysis of the texts are the right to family warmth, the right to protection from deprivation of liberty and the right to protection from discrimination. They therefore relate to one of the main categories into which the 54

articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child are categorised, namely protection, which is the overall theme of the analysis.

3. Results

Three thematic networks emerged from the data.

3.1 Description of thematic networks

The first thematic network is about family warmth. In the texts, there are often references to the love that the child receives both from the mother and from the wider family (e.g., father, grandfather, relatives) and social environment (e.g., friends, teachers). This love both protects the child from danger and helps to ensure the child's physical and mental health.

The following are extracts from the texts which primarily highlight maternal love with a positive attitude. In particular:

In the folk legend from Cyprus "The owl and the partridge", (1st issue, p.14) it is mentioned: *"My baby is the most beautiful in the school! ... What can I do to you! I looked at your baby for an hour and I couldn't see her, because there was no baby in the school who was prettier than mine!"*

In the text "I'll love you no matter what" (Debbie Giori, 1st issue, p. 22) it says: *"Of course" said Mama. "I'll love you no matter what." "Love is like the stars: it never dies and always shines."*

The second thematic network concerns the right to protection against deprivation of liberty. In all three issues, there are several references to the suffering caused to people's lives by deprivation of liberty. These texts refer to moments of the Greek nation that was enslaved to the Turks, Italians and Germans and to the period of the dictatorship. There are various dimensions to these texts.

There are texts with a strong ethnocentric dimension. In this case, the reference to the conqueror is accompanied by negative and derogatory expressions and is associated with unpleasant historical events, such as the Ottoman rule and the Revolution, the destruction of Smyrna, and the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. Such texts are:

"The Greeks" (Evgenia Fakinou, 1st issue, p. 125), where Agas is presented as an evil ruler who does whatever he wants, while the Greek inhabitants must obey him, to give him a share of the harvest *"without anyone daring to speak..."*.

"The Free Besieged" (Dionysios Solomos, 2nd issue, p. 95), where the Turk is described as *"Agarinos"*, which means the infidel, the cruel, the beast, the man-eater, the cannibal.

Moreover, there are texts with a milder ethnocentric dimension, in which no negative references to the conqueror are made. In this case, the Greeks are reacting to oppression and xenocracy and claiming their freedom, which is an inalienable right of all human beings. Such texts are:

"The Feast of No" (Kostas Kalapanidas, 1st issue, p. 124), where the people's demand for freedom is strongly projected: *"No to tyrants! No to slavery! Long live peace! Long live freedom!"*

"The fighter with the pen" (Angeliki Varella, 1st issue, p. 128), where Dionysios Solomos fought with his pen and his poetry. *"He gave us a symbol in the simple language of the people, which few literate people used at that time"*. And this symbol is *"the national anthem, a symbol of freedom"*.

There is also a category of texts in which references to the conqueror are made in a neutral or even positive way. Specifically:

In the period of the Italo-German occupation of Athens, a deep friendship develops between a child and an Italian soldier. The Italian soldier brings him food and toys. *"Now I am well! I have a friend who loves me and gives me some food... My friend is a soldier. He's Italian and his name is Giovanni... Yes, Italian! Why? Aren't there any good guys among them? They can't all be bad. Now he comes every night and brings us something. He doesn't leave us without bread. One night, he brought us toys. We love him very much. In his little Greek, he told us that he didn't want killing or war... I am telling you, Giovanni is a good man..."* ("Giovanni", Lilika Naku, 2nd issue, p. 104).

The text "Joyful kites" (Maria Piliotou, 2nd issue, p.115) refers to the situation that followed the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 and the separation of Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Both communities are trying and hoping to solve the problems on their own and to be able to co-exist peacefully. Children have a leading role. The father gives the children (Greek children) a kite. When they go up to the roof to fly it, they see two other children (Turkish children) further to the north, *"just over the line"*, waving their hands happily. They immediately think about how they will become friends. They decide to write on the kite: *"Peace, Love"*, since they want to live without wars and *"brotherly"*. The next day, the Turkish children did the same. They too flew a kite that also had something written on it in a language they did not know how to read. All the children shouted out happily. *"Never would a stranger believe that a year ago this exchange was fire, bullets, blood, death. But this exchange was not made by children."*

The right to protection from deprivation of freedom is also strongly promoted through the texts dedicated to the Polytechnic.

Characteristically, in the text "Here Polytechnic..." (Maro Douka, 2nd issue, p.110), the author presents in a vivid way the young people of the Polytechnic, who, having acquired political consciousness, transcend themselves and *"fight for the freedom of the homeland and the establishment of democracy"*.

The third thematic network concerns the right to protection against discrimination. The analysis of the surveyed material revealed that some texts refer to discrimination because of religion, race, physical appearance and the particularity of a person. The consequences of these attitudes are violence, school isolation and the marginalisation of some students.

Specifically, in the text "Give love" (Angeliki Varella, 1st issue, p.107), the negative attitude of some Greek students towards two young students from Poland is initially

presented. The teacher tries to create a climate of acceptance of cultural diversity by organising a *"friendship festival"*.

In the text "Nordin in the church" (Elsa Chiou, 2nd issue, p.72), the need to respect each other's religion is highlighted. A Turkish boy, Nordin, goes with a Greek family to church. As soon as he enters the church, he starts behaving as if he were in a mosque, which triggers the Christians' irritation. The text concludes by stating that *"The Virgin Mary who holds Christ covers all the children of the world, even the Turks"*.

Similarly, in the text "Our friends the gypsies" (Eleni Sarantiti, 3rd issue, p.256), the racist attitude of adults towards gypsies is contrasted with the friendly relationship that children develop with them. The adults consider that the gypsies seduce the children, mock them for telling fortunes by looking at their hands, while the children, on the contrary, project the view that they are *"like festive people, good people, nice people"*.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

Our planet resembles a global village due to globalization, the advent of the 4th and 5th industrial revolutions and intense demographic changes; more than 280 million people live in countries other than the ones they were born in (Karanikola & Panagiotopoulos, 2023). In addition, according to the United Nations (2019), roughly one in ten people worldwide is an internal or international migrant and one in eighties has fled conflict, wars, natural disasters or persecution. Therefore, significant violations of basic and universal human rights are occurring on a daily basis.

At the national level, Greek society and the Greek educational community are strongly characterized by diversity. Besides, about 54,417 refugees arrived in our country in 2024, while the 2021 population census showed that immigrants accounted for 11.34% of the total population (Greece Immigration Statistics, 2025; Karanikola & Panagiotopoulos, 2023). However, diversity is often associated with the manifestation of symptoms such as xenophobia, nationalism, racism, stereotypes and prejudice. Greek state in an effort to handle the intense demographic changes has adopted many international and European conventions, ratified by the respective legal framework, has enriched its models and strategies of diversity and has proceeded to changes of curricula, to the writing of new schoolbooks and to the implementation of new study programs, to the establishment of intercultural schools and Zones of Educational Priority (Bachtsiavanou *et al.*, 2023; Karanikola & Balias, 2015; Karanikola & Pitsou, 2015).

In this vein, this study tried to explore through the thematic analysis of Greek primary school anthology texts whether there are explicit or implicit references to child rights in their content. Three thematic networks emerged from the data. The first thematic network is about family warmth. The second one concerns the right to protection against deprivation of liberty, and the third one concerns the right to protection against discrimination. The analysis of the data has shown that there are significant references to child rights and more specifically to the right of protection. This category of rights is mentioned in all official texts relating to the rights of the child. The references in the texts allow children to recognize interactions between people as a positive social phenomenon,

identify behaviors that reproduce stereotypes, prejudices and violate fundamental rights, and identify negative attitudes towards differences. In addition, they propose positive attitudes and behaviors that promote respect for diversity, mutual understanding, cooperation, love and acceptance. Negative references to other people are limited to a category of texts which relate to Greek history and, in particular, to the period of Turkish rule. More references are made to the protection of freedom, peace and the unparalleled rights of human beings. This shows that the authors' aim is not exclusively to promote Greek/ethnic identity in a chauvinistic way but to create a global citizen through the promotion of his/her fundamental rights.

It is no coincidence, moreover, that most of the texts are by contemporary authors, each of whom has produced important work on contemporary social problems. After all, according to the syllabuses and the Teacher's Books (Katsiki-Givalou *et al.*, 2001b; Katsiki-Givalou *et al.*, 2006b; Tsilimeni *et al.*, 2006b), all pupils should be made aware of contemporary social problems. In this way, learners will be led to awareness, which is a *"process by which people accelerate a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural reality that shapes both their lives and their ability to transform this reality"* (Kokkos, 2005, p.57).

Abiding by the aforementioned, the contribution and impact of literature on human rights have been multifaceted. Literature can raise awareness about human rights, promote empathy and justice, and preserve marginalized voices. However, it is worth focusing on the challenges in promoting human rights through literature, such as limited access to literature, language barriers, political censorship, limited representation, and lack of funding (Naseem *et al.*, 2023).

Last but not least, the results of this study should be treated with caution, as it is a small-scale research study in which only the three primary school anthology texts are examined. However, the issue that arises from the present analysis can be an extension of this research study by examining the way of approaching these texts, so that their teaching does not remain only at the level of knowledge but extends to the level of skills and attitudes. Thus, relevant training could play a significant role towards this direction, since well-educated and informed teachers are more likely to implement more participatory and inclusive pedagogies and adjust their teaching practices to the needs of their multilingual and multicultural classroom (Gay, 2018; Karanikola, 2024; Panagiotopoulos *et al.*, 2022).

Finally, experiential education, the implementation of work projects, the use of technology, structured dialogue, discussion around global current events linked to the ongoing violation of rights, role-playing are some of the practices that appear to be effective in enhancing students' participation, making learning more relevant to students' needs, documenting their progress, and promoting comprehension, socialization, integration and active engagement (Antoniadou *et al.*, 2022; Karanikola *et al.*, 2022; OECD, 2018; Papadopoulou *et al.*, 2022, Pitsou & Zotou, 2025).

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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