Development of Socio-Cultural Identity at Primary School Children Through School Projects

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Abstract

The celebration of our country's 100 year of unification called for a different approach in primary school context to discover about community, national values, and important Romanian figures. The development of socio-cultural identity in primary school children through different learning projects leads them in learning about different traditions and specificity of their country. The children were challenged by their teacher to make different projects involving their peers and also knowledge to showcase their understanding for traditions and customs. Pupils learned and had a powerful experience researching for historical facts about their ancestors and the minorities who live in their country. Group and individual projects helped the children in a better understanding of the differences and similarities between the people living in our country. The current paper presents some of the practices and projects that took place in the classroom of third graders starting with September 2017.

Keywords: primary education, community, school projects learning, national values

1. Introduction

The socio-cultural theory of L. S. Vygotsky exposes concepts of proximity development that can be translated as follows: the child must be seen not only as a human, but also as an active part of a functioning society. Vygotsky had as his main theme his analysis of child development on three levels: cultural, interpersonal and individual. The zone of proximal development is the link between the knowledge already acquired by a child and what the child can learn / develop under pedagogical, cognitive and socio-cultural guidance, as the development of the child first appears on the social and scholastic level, then on a cognitive level and psychologically. The knowledge and skills the children need for their development require certain tools such as language and technology and these tools are offered by the culture they grow up in (Vygotsky cited in Miller 2011). Societies are challenged constantly by trends of change and they are always in a quest for change and these changes are encountered also at the biological levels of development (Erikson cited in Miller 2011). The need for change is manifested in the school educational system, but not limited to this, as teachers must find the balance and the right social and emotional settings to develop children's skills for a constant changing environment. A set of types of educations is emerging in the school system to help shape a functioning person to society. Two of these educations participate directly in the development of attitudes, respect, behaviors, conscience for society and behavior. Intercultural education and civic education are trying to fill in the void from the other educations undertaken in school. These new educations are promoting respect for oneself and respect for others, devising attitudes and behaviors that lead to compliance for the rights of others, respecting, understanding and valorizing cultural diversity, formation of consciousness and behavior as a member of society.

The child and the cultural setting

In the fast growing globalizes world personal cultural identity is derived from their surroundings and is influenced by a sum of factors: background, social status, social acceptance. Culture has many definitions one being that culture is a concept in many instances subconscious and which is expressed by a set of common values that are evidenced in the behavior and other trades of a certain group (Hall, Hofstede cited in Dahl 2005). There's a mutual creation process between individuals and cultural communities. Children can learn from certain social practice and their behavior makes sense of the environment and their set goals (Miller 2011). When creating works of their own children can learn the knowhow and this introduces the child to next level of knowledge. Children interact with other children or other peers in different settings: classroom, home, museums, workshops etc. Their interactions are dictated by their knowledge and their ability to spot social and cultural cues and at a young age (5-6 yo) these cultural cues are found by the child by adjusting to the peers'

cultural customs. Making assumptions about the others culture helps the child adjust to the convenient behavior that benefits him in that particular situation. When playing with children from their own culture children were seen to be able to determine the cultural cue in accordance with the situation (Goldvicht-Bacon and Diesendruck 2016). Cultural activities are important resources for learning about their culture and their background. One study found that a mother's social status in society and level of education determined the time and type of the cultural related leisure activities with the children and not only hers but also her husband's (Gracia 2015). Social capital is an important asset in children's education. Parents, caretakers and teachers must come together to offer the best environment for the child's development. The parents are a valuable resource and their time spent attending to their child's homework or extracurricular activities should be valued. One study has researched the benefits of a program that was implemented to help parents to manage their time and resources in their efforts to provide their children the help they needed in school. The success of the program was found and the continuation of the success for this support-program is highly related to the consistent participation of the parents and the teachers (Lopez Turley et al. 2017).

In Romania there are recognized minorities who live in harmony under one flag and the population represents 11% of the total population of our country. Some of these minorities include and are not limited to: Hungarians, Rromas, Ukrainians, Germans, Russians, Turks, Slovaks, Serbs, Bulgarians, Greeks, Croats, Jews, Czechs, Tatars, poles, Italians, Chinese, Armenians, Csangos. In the Romanian school system education for minorities means the type of education that provides classes for all subjects in their mother tongue, except Romanian language and literature and upon request are provided as study subjects, literature, music, history and traditions of the respective national minority. Each minority has its own particularities and customs and the main goal for everyone is to share and embrace ones differences. There are held Olympiads for different subjects (literature, maths, poetry, religion) in the mother tongue for some of the minorities. We have for example: the national math Olympiad, religion contest and national history and traditions Olympiad in Hungarian; national poetry and literature Olympiad in Russian, Croatian and Slovak.

The background of cultural learning

In a globalized world there are little chances that children don't encounter other cultures as they develop. Being multilingual and sharing other cultural environment is common place and is regarded as a benefit for the evolution of an individual and a society (Haritatos & Benet-Martínez 2002). The chances of an individual to be a "product of one culture" are slightly low from happening (Lukešová & Martincová 2015). We have classrooms with children of different cultural backgrounds and they are tied together by one common goal: learning. Communication and cooperation is achieved in the school environment by intercultural communication. Identity is a mere construct for young children who are just starting to develop in a world where everything is new and excited. Along with the beginning of the school years this search for identity is seen with more confusion and nevertheless enthusiasm. Children begin to wonder about the ties and differences between the others and the self. What makes them be who they are is a quest that may well go into their old age. For the time being they still have to identify a setting in which they connect and engage.

The classroom setting and school as well play an important background for the development of the social and cultural identity. These are places where children learn more about their common heritage, history, traditions and culture. What makes them feel safe is the feeling of belonging to a nation, a language, a family. In the unity of shared history and traditions children learn different aspects of different cultures and nations. They understand what makes them who they are and what they have to value and respect. A sense of respect for ones mother tongue and culture is required, but shouldn't be an imposed limit. Embracing different cultures is a lesson every child must be taught. When the child learns about different aspects of history, about important people that made important changes, about different cultures, his knowledge is enriched manyfold and this benefits his understanding of the world around him. In primary school children are overwhelmed with studying subjects, math and literature being the most important of them all. In Romania, children learn about personal development starting from age six in the school system. They are introduced with notions of self, respect for one another, positive attitude towards other and oneself, communicating with colleagues and teachers, rules of communication in school activity, basic emotions. This subject is being taught until the second grade and starting with the third grade (9-10 yo) children are introduced to civic education. This subject familiarizes the pupil with notions of person, relationship between things and people, relationships between people. This is being taught until the end of the primary cycle.

Project base learning

Project based learning is not a new method of teaching. This has been used for several years one and it's a method that offers a lot of benefits for pupils and teachers. Projects are an exciting method for pupils as they engage them in a new setting and offer new possibilities for learning. Projects can be used to teach and learn different subjects and it can be used at all grade levels. According to BIE (Buck Institute for Education) projects: inspire children in thinking outside the box, prepare them for academic and personal success, empower pupils in building critical thinking and problem solving in a collaborative setting.

Every project that we have in the classroom starts with a challenging question that's waiting to be brainstormed. The preparation for the project requires important steps and the teacher must consider the necessary tasks required for a successful learning experience. According to Eric Jenses (2009, cited on Edutopia.org) there are three main focus points that the teacher must take into account when applying project based learning: success is for all children (no matter their background), building fruitful relationships between the children and between the children and their teachers, empowering pupils in providing them an opportunity for adding their own voice and ideas.

The current paper concentrated on learning activities through school project on the development of socio-cultural identity in the third grade. The purpose of the paper was to establish the influence of project base learning in school and at home for a better understanding of pupils' development and have knowledge of the way they perceive different aspects of their culture and heritage. The objective of the current paper was to showcase the learning experience and outcomes of the project base learning activities in third graders.

2. Methodology

Participants and materials

The participants for this study were 22 children (N_{female}=8, N_{male}=14, M_{age}=9.09) enrolled in the third grade at a school in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Participants in the project included the parents and siblings of the children as some of the research and projects were done at home with help. The time for the projects lasted across eight weeks during September – December 2017.

The materials needed for the research of the projects included books, articles, online articles, text books. Additional information was provided by the classroom teacher and special guest teachers of the school. They introduced the children into new domains and provided them with valuable knowledge and insights. The children also used a notebook for recording the words and phrases that they learned during the weeks of the learning period.

Procedure and results

There were two stages of the study that had two main themes. The first theme was titled "*Celebrating with minorities*" and lasted for seven weeks. During this time the children had to make different presentation papers, drawings to represent the specifics of the minority that was being studied in that week. The research was done at home and on Friday they presented their finding. Discussions were held to debate the different approaches for research and the aspects were discussed. Each Friday was dedicated for the full immersion into the culture of the minority of the week. The teacher would prepare common words and phrases in the mother tongue and special culinary delicatesses specific to that minority. Guest teacher for Hungarian language was invited in September to teach the children basic Hungarian words and phrases. The children learned about traditional customs and folk costumes. By the end of November the children were already accustomed to this type of learning and they had been introduced in the cultures of: Hungarians, Germans, Rroma, Greeks, Turks, Israeli and Bulgarian.

The second theme of the project was titled "*Celebrating Romania*". In the preparation for Romania's National Day in December the pupils had to research and make two projects. The first project consisted in depictions of traditional Romanian houses from different regions across the country. The children could choose what type of house they would draw/paint and they would give a small presentation for explaining why they chose that specific house and why did they like it. The medium for creating the drawing was left to the pupil. He could use crayons, graphic crayons, tempera, water colours and the paper was at his own choice. At the end of the week a gallery was presented and each child had to present his depiction of the "house".

For the second project, the pupils had to build a model for one traditional Romanian house and give also a small description and reasons for choosing this particular house. With the help of our schools technological education teacher the children learned about the materials that they could use in building the model house. The children had two weeks to prepare the project along with their parents and input from their teacher. At the end of the two weeks, in December, the children presented their projects in front of the class and also at a gallery dedicated especially for these types of projects. We had a total of 68 drawing/paintings (figure 1) and a total of eight traditional Romanian model houses (figure 2).

Figure 1. Drawings, words and phrases from the day the class celebrated with the Germans

Figure 2. Model of traditional house made by one of the pupils

The last stage of the study was designed to find the children's feedback by using a semistructed questionnaire consisting of 7 open questions. Some of the questions were: "*What other area in Romania would you like to visit? Why*?", "*What type of traditional house did you enjoy most to the project "Traditional Houses in Romania"? Why?*", "*What personality of Romania (about which you learned / read) seemed to you most interesting? How did he impress you?*". The children each gave their input on the questions and their answers were analyzed using a qualitative approach. Children were enthusiastic about their new found knowledge of different minorities. They were particular interested in other's people language and culture and they enjoyed learning words and phrases of different people and the mini dictionary that they compiled with the new learned words. They also liked the houses that they had to build and the way they build them was an interesting process. There are some that would like to visit other parts of the country to learn more about the specifics of the region or the city and their people. Important people and personalities were a particular interest as well. They included Romanian kings, but also writers and sport athletes among the personalities that they enjoyed learning about.

Conclusions

The current study was designed to determine the influence of school projects in the development of socio-cultural identity in primary school children. The results have showed that learning through projects is a useful tool that can accommodate even a difficult school task. School activities were met with enthusiasm by the children who waited the end of the week with grand expectations. The resulting projects helped children in developing a new sense of the people with different

background that live along side each other in our country. Their cultural knowledge was enriched by the different words and phrase that they learned, but also the experience they had when finding for themselves about different Romanian personalities that influenced our countries ways and also the world.

The other guest teachers also constituted a great asset in helping them access knowledge suitable to develop new meaning and giving them means for using this knowledge in finding out about the culture and specificities of minorities. Another contribution was made by the parents who committed to the projects that their child had to make for school. They made time and put an effort in helping their child find the right information for the project.

One limitation of the current study would be a time allocated to learning about each minority and the fact that we didn't have time to learn about all the recognized minorities in Romania. For a future study there should be a given more time and resources for learning about all the minorities and also a time dedicated to learning about more important personalities that shaped our country.

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