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Does knowing the ethnic context make instruction in citizenship more effective - or just exacerbate prejudices?

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Introduction

Citizenship education calls for the education of knowledge, skills and values that help the young to become informed and responsible citizens. Yet, some groups, now even within the European Community, have not been integrated into mainstream society with full success. Since the problem of cultural integration of any ethnic subgroup is usually perceived to be bound to their cultural context, researchers studying particular ethnic and cultural phenomena are driven by the desire to gather a sound descriptive data on speciality in national character. Although looking at the unique historical and cultural traditions and contexts as a major causative factor of social exclusion is attractive, it also requires critical examination and reviewing.

Previous attempts to integrate Roma people into the society at large have been less than fully successful. This was in part because of marked differences in the culture and some other customs between Roma and the mainstream society. Some historically based ethnographic narratives present Romanies in the form of a descriptive catalogue of features that somehow emphasise exoticism or qualities of uninhibited natural men which have to be brought into the mainstream society. They usually present traditional Roma culture as it was practised before Romas were intensively exposed to sophisticated industrialised urban ways of living. Even though such descriptions are written with the ambition to discover the most peculiar nuances, the fact that a particular ethnic group becomes a subject of interest and speculation may result in intensified ostracising. Besides, the instructional implication of such kind of research is methodologically feeble.

To overcome the implied research's shortcomings we believe it is necessary to provide a synthesis between qualitative and quantitative methods of enquiry. Gathering and classifying the descriptive data, however well organised, is only a first step which may lead, after classification and interpretation, to the more sophisticated examinations of specific hypotheses suggested for educational strategies concerning both remediation and enrichment purposes in the education of these children (in terms of constructivism). The proposed methodology is thus a supplement to older traditions of ethnographic qualitative research, striving to create typologies for the investigation of educational phenomena. The broader research questions then are:

- What knowledge do Romany societies consider so important that it must be embodied in the Slovak system of instruction and examination?
- How do these perceptions facilitate or hinder the preparation of good citizens?

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Romany children's adaptive skills

Understanding the cognitive and social strengths (adaptive skills) of Roma children is important so that these strengths can be capitalised on in the educational system to help them profit from education. By teaching primarily to their strengths rather than largely to their weaknesses, we hope ultimately to improve Romany children's school achievement. Adjusted schooling combined with proper citizenship education is thus instrumental in helping the Romany ethnic take better advantage of the benefits of life in the European Community. In order to determine the range of adaptive skills of Romany children living in Slovakia we have elaborated the research proposal intended to be implemented in ten selected Roma settlements.

The project is designed in co-operation with Yale University, New Haven, USA, PACE (Psychological Centre for Abilities, Competencies and Expertise).

Theoretical background of the research on adaptive skills

The possible model of the research arises on the assumption that people think and act differently in different cultures. Wang, Ceci, Williams and Kopko (2004) argue that competence results from the adaptation of individual abilities to socio-cultural environments. Because different cultures represent different living environments, people of different cultures possess cognitive competencies unique to those environments. The competence of the culture representative – in the case of our research it is the Roma ethnic group – is relative to:

- The particular cognitive spheres or domains valued in a culture;
- The social and physical context in which the child participates in organised activities;
- The cultural and societal demands perceived by the child himself or herself.

Matsumoto (2004) points out that there are no invariant, core competencies universal to every human child.

The concept of children's competence attracts the attention of many developmental psychologists (Cicchetti and Cohen, 1995; Denham and Holt, 1993; Masten and Coatsworth, 1995). Competence is defined as possession of a required skill, knowledge, qualification or capacity. The concept of competency covers a cluster of constructs related to successful (adaptive) functioning at a given age and in a given cultural and historical environment (Grigorenko, 2004).

The content of the core competencies can differ not only from culture to culture, but also in the social groups of the different socio-economical levels, majorities, minorities etc. However, the general structure underlying the relationships between competencies and life adjustment should be the same across different cultures and societies.

Most of the children in the Roma settlements live and grow in an atypical (disadvantaged or threatening) environment. The development of those children cannot be studied and understood with the list of the competencies preferred by the majority. The curriculum

designers and the authors of the intervention strategies for Roma children must know and understand the core competencies substantial for successful life in their culture, and how such competencies are required. The success of life adjustment is determined by how well a child is able to master the competencies necessary for prospering in life, including meeting the demands of culture, society, community, community and family. (E.g. a 10 year old Roma girl has to be able to take care of the younger siblings, cook, pick up the berries and fruits in the forest, sell them; alike the same age Roma boy must be able to recognise and bring the appropriate wood for a fire, recognise the places where the mushrooms are growing, differentiate the edible mushrooms from the poisonous ones, find the eggs of the wild birds etc (Kovalčíková, unpublished source)).

Our research is drawn from the premise that, until now, the research of pupils' academic achievement has focused primarily on cognitive competencies of pupils from a majority society with a dominant weight on competencies necessary for successful mastering of academic tasks required by school. But for many Roma children the experience of schooling and, therefore, school competence, are rather distant to the fulfilment of their immediate needs of safety and well being. Grigorenko, O'Keefe (2004) point out the fact that almost no theory or research has dealt with methods of gaining competencies for children who do not consider adjusting to school as their primary or essentially important competence, since they attend school sporadically and, likewise their parents, regard school attendance as a marginal activity.

Based on the above we primarily focus on researching competencies - adaptive skills of Romany children – preferred by their family, and thus important for survival in their social setting. It is obvious that ethnic groups, nations or races differ from each other in cultural patterns represented by the educational style of parents and the extent of accountability for educating their child. Such cross-cultural difference is conspicuous when comparing family attitudes to education in Romany and mainstream families in Slovakia. Formal schooling of Romany children distinctively does not take an equally prominent position as within non-Roma families which often leads to breaching the legal provision of compulsory school attendance. The outlined research then also strives to overcome the negative impact of the rather indifferent mindset of Romany parents to the majority school system, since it is still viewed by Romas, despite the joint effort of significant institutions, as an 'alien institution'.

Description of applied methods and research stages

The goal of the research described in this paper is to elicit and evaluate the significance of the preferred abilities of Roma children.

The research proposal uses methods related to ethnopedagogy and cultural psychology. Its purpose is to combine qualitative and quantitative methods to gain the following facts:

1. Cultural specifics regarding education within Romany family;
2. Intercultural differences between majority and Romany parents' attitudes towards formal schooling of their children;

3. Range of competencies and adaptive skills of Romany children preferred within their family or wider community setting;
4. Romany parents' demand on adaptive skills and competencies expected from boys and girls;
5. Differences in the range of adaptive skills and competencies related to child's age;
6. Differences in the parents' expectations of adaptive skills and competencies of their children, with independent variables of a) family's socio-economical standard, b) Roma ethnic subgroup (Rumunger, Walach-Rom, Hungarian Rom), c) parents' education.

It is assumed that the anthropological data of the above intercultural specifics can provide an inspiring and relevant source of information for designing educational strategies especially in pre-school and elementary stages - including citizenship education. The outcomes of cross-psychological research are instrumental for the proper training of prospective teachers in classes with an ethnically heterogeneous composition of pupils.

1st stage – Theoretical analysis of the existing references

Goal

Creation of the theoretical basis for the research, defining key terms, getting overview in international ethnographic researches.

2nd stage - Ethnographic semi-structured interview

Goal

The goal of this stage is to formulate a comprehensive list of adaptive competencies of Roma children, as perceived by children's parents. The product comprises a list of adaptive competencies, annotated for relevance of a function of children's sex and age.

Participants

Participants are recruited among 50 parents of Roma children of ages 6-12 in ten different Roma communities, representing the widest possible distribution of geographic and socio-economic conditions.

Procedure

An interview is constructed to assess a broad range of adaptive competencies. These competencies include the following domains: (a) household chores, (b) chores outside the home, (c) understanding of adaptive tasks that are expected of the child, (d) domain-based skills (expanded from Gardner): linguistic, logical/mathematical, musical, artistic, naturalist, interpersonal, intrapersonal, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, spiritual; (e) any other competencies that parents think are particularly important; (f) how the competencies expected differ for boys versus girls; (g) how the competencies expected vary in the 6-12 age range.

Parents are asked in an interview, lasting approximately 60 minutes, to help us develop an inventory of adaptive competencies in Roma children age 6-12, both boys and girls. The outcome is a comprehensive set of adaptive competencies.

Outputs

Anthropological data on:

- Substantial key competencies necessary for successful life in a Roma family, community or wider cultural context,
- Processes leading to acquisition of such competencies.

3rd stage – Questionnaire or structured interview

Goal

The goal of this stage is to transform the list of adaptive competencies obtained in the 2nd stage into an inventory - questionnaire items. The questionnaire is administered among the different groups of parents to get the characteristics on their children's strengths and weaknesses.

Participants

Participants are 100 parents of Roma children of ages 8-12 from ten different Roma communities, representing the widest possible distribution of geographic and socio-economic conditions.

Procedure

Parents are asked the age and sex of each of their children. Then, they are assigned to a response group, depending upon the ages of the majority of their children - that is, to answer questions either in the 6-9 or 10-12 range. Parents are asked to rate in the questionnaire the importance for success in a child's life of each adaptive competency for the designated group.

4th stage – Statistical procedures

Processing collected data to determine the relationships of the following categories:

- Competencies and gender of child,
- Competencies and age of child,
- Preferred competencies and social status of family,
- Preferred competencies and ethnic subgroup,
- Preferred competencies and education of parents.

Factor analysis

Items of the questionnaire (or structured interview – the alternative in the case of illiterate parents) will be subjected to principal-axis factor analysis with varimax rotation in order to determine the latent common factors underlying the ratings. These factors may or may not retain the original structure of the questionnaire.

Comparisons

Repeated-measures analysis-of-variance techniques will be used to analyse the rotated factor-score data for: (a) ratings for boys versus girls, (b) ratings for 6-9 year old versus 10-12 year old children.

Conclusion

Contribution of the research is assumed in the three areas:

Eliciting reliable facts about cultural specifics of Romany ethnic group

We assume that the elicited facts on competencies and adaptive skills which the Romany child should perform within his/her socio-cultural setting can provide valuable information for the design of curricular and instructional materials to be used in educating the particular minority group.

Utilisation of ethnopedagogical findings into teachers' training

Newly accredited undergraduate program *Pre-school and elementary education of socially disadvantaged groups* reflects the needs of Presov's Region and wider areas of Eastern Slovakia. It is the region with the highest number of underachieving Romany pupils. Due to a difficult communication between school and families the ethnographic and anthropological data elicited in the course of research can be instrumental to university tutors and designers of reference books recommended for the above course in order to bridge the gap. The research's immediate outcomes are planned to be published as a course text *Adaptive skills of Romany children*.

Introduction of ethnopedagogy and cross-cultural psychology as a research paradigm in the Slovak context

Applying relevant research procedures (analysed in the part e) we attempt to compile a model of competencies and adaptive skills of Roma children via combination of ethnographic (qualitative) and statistical (quantitative) methods.

We assume that the proposed methodology can be inspiring in discovering socio-cultural specifics of various ethnic groups.

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