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Child's identity and citizenship begins in the early years

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Introduction

Culture is a system of human values, which change in time and from group to group. Identity, the consciousness of the acting self, is a part of this cultural change process. Identity is a concept, which can be researched through different branches of knowledge: philosophy, social sciences, neurology etc. Education also participates when we consider the formation of identity in early childhood.

Identity

The identity does not grow from the inside out; its roots are cultural. With development identity undergoes structural changes in important transitional periods. There are three periods before the school age: The first is the newly born period, when the activity of the child is still joint activity with the mother or the caretaker. The next is the second half of the first year, with the profound interest of the child in manipulating objects. The third is the period of imaginative play which begins in the beginning of the second year and lasts into the school years.

Identity starts already before the birth

There are the different periods before the school age in the child's life, when the child is a member of their society. According to Althusser (2000) human individuals are already subjects, even before their birth. The philosophy refers to the habits of the family at the times of pregnancy, e.g. name giving as well as the rituals after the birth. The infant is welcomed as a person, he will be dressed like his age mates, specifically as a boy or as a girl. The identity of the individual grows in the cultural conditions of his family from the very beginning. Before the birth the voice of the mother sounds already to their ears, the music the mother listens to is available also to the unborn child as well as they take part in the rhythm of their mother's daily life. When the baby comes to the outer world, a new social situation of development begins.

According to Hegstrup (2005, 32-33) there are many marks, which show that the child is a citizen from birth. The child has a personal ID number, families get advice and society gives support on many levels both physically and emotionally.

Citizenship

There are many definitions of citizenship and one often used is the following: 'citizenship is not a passive condition (simply enjoying a set of rights and freedoms) but should be active, based on political and civic participation'. (See Dyrfjord et al 2004)

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Citizenship education consists from different areas which are according to Grossman et alia (2000) the following:

1. Civic education - The building of a knowledge base for civic beliefs and skills for civic participations.
2. Values education - The acquisition of dispositions and predilections that provide the foundations for civic attitudes and beliefs.
3. Environmental education - The process of developing understanding, skills and values, consistent with the notion of sustainable development (See Bauer et alia 2003,4).

Culture and enculturation

The higher psychical processes in humans, as differentiated from the primary, the lower ones, are internalized social relationships, mediated by signs, which have replaced the lower functions (Vygotsky 1988, 162). Human higher psychic activity is culturally mediated. The use of objects as tools and of the language as a social tool are important processes in this mediation. Culturally mediated activities lead to changes in the construction of personality. It may be that, in the transitional periods from one structure to another, the functioning of the adult is of special importance.

Each nation has its own culture of values, norms and habits, and these traditions influence the development of a child's identity, including behaviour, citizenship and partnership in a European or a global culture. The environment of the child's family transfers culture to the child. Cultural behaviour, such as how to greet, is learned in everyday life (Valsiner 2000, Addo 2001). Children learn the traditions and social manners through the life of their family and in other social occasions. (See Korhonen 2002; Korhonen & Helenius 2005).

Althusser (2000,22-23) stresses that the personality will be formed through culture and cultural activities. According to contextualism (Hujala 2002) the child's living environments are meaningful on many levels in the child's development. Wider support of society like the institutionally organised daycare and education in kindergarten helps families nowadays with their educational tasks. Children often have in these groups different ethnical backgrounds, which makes the enculturation richer. Multiculturalism sets demands for the teachers. They must be skilful in organizing the pedagogical activities as well as in leading the relations of the children in order that the group will benefit the richness of cultural impacts. (See Korhonen 2002; Korhonen & Helenius 2005).

The role as a possibility to prove other identities

The imitation is a way to learn to understand oneself as well as other persons. Early childhood is the strongest period of imitation. It is further on combined with imaginative play. The child can now move themselves to the imaginative realm, where he/she can overcome obstacles through the imagination even when reality hinders his/hers strivings for adult-like activity. Before the age of three years the child is already able assume a role.

A role can be seen as a plan for the own activity of the child and it enables also the complex planned co-operation with other roles in the same play scenario. Although the play is imaginative, what happens is real, the child's actions and the co-operation with other, the emotions, the dialogue. Also real are the cultural models and rules imitated. The roles show the child's development of character. Play gives the opportunity to open new ideals to the child's self-identification (Korhonen & Helenius 2005). Adults can help the child to be aware of his interests and widen them. The child's portfolio gives new possibilities already in early childhood to document the child's experiences and even send the data between home and kindergarten.

Self-esteem

Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke (2000, 12) have emphasized, that by promoting positive self-esteem we can encourage positive interactions, encourage discussion about how they and others feel and bring attention to others points of views, try to ensure that they learn constructive ways to solve conflicts and to promote co-operation, not competition.

High self-esteem is a reflection of the possession of a secure sense of identity, and an ability to acknowledge and value one's own efforts and achievements. High self-esteem provides confidence, energy and optimism and is promoted by positive self-experiences.

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