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Project-based Learning to Promote Citizenship Education in Greek Primary Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper presents a small-scale research project on a project-based learning approach to citizenship education. Project-based learning and citizenship education share a common principle, that of active pupil participation in real life situations. Utilising a case study research design, the paper illustrates the levels of pupil participation experienced by a Year 6 class in a Greek primary school, where children took decisions related to their active involvement and interaction within the class, the school and the local community. Observations and interviews show that children's participation in this particular class strengthened social responsibility in the class and school as well as in the community. The class culture was transformed into a democratic and supportive environment, later extended to the whole school.

Introduction

In recent years, inquiry-based learning, often organized as project work in schools, has become increasingly prominent as a response of schooling to the challenges of the 21st Century. The 'project method' teaching approach or the project-based learning (P-BL) involves study/research of a topic in depth where pupils' ideas, questions, predictions and interests form the experiences lived and the works/activities undertaken. The key-characteristic of the P-BL is researching questions which have been raised by the pupils or/and in collaboration with the class teacher and could be further refined during the course of the study.

Further characteristics of the P-BL are described in the literature as follows (see Chard, 2001; Curtis, 2002; Frey, 1994; Harris, 2002; Katz & Chard, 1999; Krajcik, Czerniak & Berger, 1999; McGrath, 2002; Solomon, 2003; Thomas, 2000;): pupils can choose the activities and works undertaken during the course of the study, they can become communicative, creative and develop practical thinking as they are engaged in active inquiry/discovery, exploration and decision making; knowledge is based on experience and experimentation in real/authentic life; the outcomes of the study can be applicable to community life and. Children acquire or apply knowledge linked to real life outside the school. There is also a frequently voiced claim that P-BL increases team-working and cooperative learning skills (Jones et al., 1997).

Citizenship is not easy to define as it is a concept which includes different dimensions. 'The concept of citizenship is founded on the notion of individual as actor in a democratic polity and this requires an understanding and acceptance of human rights' (Osler and Starkey, 2000, p 4). According to Veldhuis (1997) citizenship is by many

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understood as political citizenship encompassing a social, cultural and economical dimension. Political citizenship has a two-fold meaning: first that one has political and juridical rights and obligations in a given society and second that s/he is actively involved in shared communities and at the same time feels responsible towards society (ibid). The social dimension of political citizenship refers to the mutual relations between members of a community and is essential to the relationship between the person and the community (ibid). The cultural dimension refers to the awareness of a common cultural heritage (Veldhruis, 1997), however in the multicultural arena of the contemporary societies it can also refer to the awareness of a diversity of cultures which is essential for peaceful co-existence and community and societal development to a pluralist / humanistic ideal. The economical dimension refers to the right of the individual to a job and a standard of living. Therefore citizenship can be an individual and a collective concern. Citizenship can be also used alternatively as membership in a close or wide community or society (Field, 1998).

The development of citizenship must be seen from the angle of creating active involvement and participation in the society at different levels and a feeling of responsibility towards the community. Thus 'citizenship or civics education is construed broadly to encompass the preparation of young people for their roles and responsibilities as citizens and in particular, the role of education in that preparatory process' (Kerr, 2000, p 201). The three main approaches of teaching and learning in citizenship education are *culture*, *content* and *climate* (ibid, p 211).

Enactive learning of citizenship will naturally involve the enactive aspects of citizenship. This will not be about the study and appreciation of rights won in the past, and the icons and concepts that relate to these, but the involvement of young people in establishing rights in their own schools and societies, and extending rights to the third generation. Teaching citizenship is learning citizenship through participation (Ross, 2006, p 40 – 41).

The hyphen between citizenship education and project-based learning can be the fact that both have a claim for learning through active pupil participation in real/authentic situations of life in a school, community and society.

Project-based learning and education for citizenship in Greek primary schools

Soon after the millennium a reformed national curriculum was introduced in Greek primary schools consisting of cross-curricular concepts and units in all subjects. It is the *Cross-Curricular Integrated Frame of Programmes of Study* (CCIFPS) for all compulsory education (between year 1 and year 9, including kindergardens) (Pedagogical Institute, 2003). The Greek Ministry of Education Affairs also introduced a pilot programme called *Flexible Zone of Innovative Actions* (FZIA) during the school year 2001-2002 in order to evaluate the cross-curricular forms of teaching in primary schools. Teachers did not receive any extended training, except an introductory session, and application was left to what they understood. The Flexible Zone of Innovative Actions now forms part of the CCIFPS, during which teachers are expected to use project work for one to two teaching hours per week minimum. Projects could be cross-curricular or interdisciplinary however, the central concept of a project work was a child-

centred, open-ended and explorative learning. The new national curriculum (CCIFPS) allowed a 10% of teaching time in each subject throughout the school year to be spent in cross-curricular topic study which could be raised from activities or questions asked in pupils' textbooks.

In primary education, citizenship education is both a cross-curricular theme and a separate compulsory subject in its own right (European Commission, 2004/5, p 3). Citizenship education as a cross-curricular theme includes concepts and topics of study in different subjects such as 'environmental studies', 'the Greek language', 'history' and 'religious education' (ibid, p 4). Citizenship education as a separate subject under the title 'social and civic education' (SCE) is taught in Years 5 and 6 (Grades 5 and 6). In the textbooks for both year groups a civic literacy is mainly addressed (human rights, children's rights, and human duties) (ibid). Extra-curricular educational activities arising from the school culture and participation in community life is claimed to be marginal in the Greek educational system (ibid, p 6) and non-existent in the primary school level. A number of interdisciplinary and extra-curricular activities that aim to raise awareness of European citizenship among pupils take place in primary schools. These activities include: participation in European programmes such as Socrates-Comenius, etc., pupil exchange programmes for late years of primary school, children's literature from European countries and research into games played by children from other European countries and relate them to the culture, tradition of each and present them to the rest of the school (ibid, p 9). Nevertheless, there exist significant initiatives from primary school teachers who implement cross-curricular themes. This study is based on this approach linking P-BL with citizenship education.

Method

The methodology applied in this study is qualitative where the researcher attempts to understand naturally occurring phenomena (event, programme, community, relationship or interaction) in their naturally occurring stages (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Patton, 1990; Slavin, 1992). More specifically the current study is based on the case study research design (Bassegy, 1999; Yin, 1994). The objective of the present study was to investigate the possible links between P-BL and citizenship education and the effects on class culture. The research methods used were: interviews, informal discussions and classroom observations. A year 6 class of a primary school in the town of Chalkida (Greece) was the actual case study and the selection process was based on the volunteer character of the class teacher. The participants of the research process included 24 pupils and the class teacher. Interviews were conducted with the pupils and the class teacher whereas informal discussions only with the class teacher. The class teacher also kept a journal of the activities and events in the classroom during the project.

The project officially lasted for two terms and activities were implemented between two to three teaching hours a week within the 'flexible zone' teaching hours. 'Flexible zone' allows teachers to use their teaching time in teaching under the aegis of projects. Once the main ideas were developed, timing was not followed for implementing actions which soon became part of the class culture and climate.

Findings and discussion

The fundamental idea of the implementation of an authentic P-BL is pupils' participation in conceiving the topic to be studied, their engagement in planning, organising and carrying out activities which are experiential, field-based and connected to real life situations. The main question raised by pupils in the class-case study was: 'Who needs help?' and the project was structured around a topic web under a conceptual framework of awareness of and sensitivity for personal needs and responsibilities.

The teacher co-ordinated the class discussion so as all decided on a project plan with specific thematic units. The thematic units in a topic web in the first place were organised broadly as follows:

1. Whom can we help in our school?
2. Whom can we ask for help in our school?
3. Who needs help in the local community?
4. Whom can we ask for help in the local community?
5. How can I help children in distant communities?

Then these thematic units were organised in activities, some of which were carried out in the class and others outside the class. Activities which required pupils' preparation for visits and study information from secondary sources (i.e preparing a visit outside the class in a field-based environment or when they had to interview people from the community or working on information from books, internet sites etc.) were classroom based. Activities which required pupils' visits and observations in real situations were also classroom based in cases where they needed to provide help to peers in the class or the school and field-based in cases where they had to provide help to people in the local community. The activities were planned to be carried out in certain class organisation techniques (such as class discussion, pair or group work, individual work) during the implementation of the project. Negotiations were made in the class between the pupils and the teacher, establishing a democratic class climate/culture where the teacher did not attempt to impose his decisions on his pupils. Instead, his efforts to include pupils' decisions in what activities and class organisation to be used, indicates his child-centred approach to teaching and that he exposed his pupils to experiencing needs and responsibilities for their own learning.

The study / search of the topic was planned in different circles for pupils' participation starting from the closer one to pupils' daily life and moving to the more distant, i.e the school, then the local community and last, other distant communities. In this approach the teacher alongside his pupils attempted to develop multiple citizenship identities such as local, national and international. Important to note here is that the teacher was an active participant from both perspectives, the one from pupils' and the one from the teacher's, meaning that he also asked himself questions and searched for answers acting as pupil and teacher at the same time. For example, when they had to decide on activities or actions about the first thematic unit, he also asked himself and attempted to give answers to 'whom can I help in my school?'. His first reply was to help pupils who did not participate in the class lessons then, he specified that he could help pupils who found difficulties during lessons. Similarly his pupils realised that they could offer help and support to peers who were finding difficulties in carrying out class activities.

During the first and second thematic unit pupils discussed their ideas for activities and actions in groups and decided that they could offer their help to class peers or to other pupils in the school. Providing help to peers in the class was not organised as a specific activity in a given time (i.e one to two teaching hours), but as an action undertaken in needed times during any subject lesson. By this, pupils developed a class routine where a competitive climate was gradually reduced and peer tutoring was reinforced. Peer tutoring did not attract all pupils from the beginning of its implementation however the teacher rewarded those pupils who met their thematic unit aims creating thus a centre of attention for other pupils who did not act for peer help. By the end of the project all pupils were accustomed – some to a great and others to a lesser extent – to using their time (when they finished their work) constructively helping their peers in the lessons. Moreover pupils got used to this working ethos in the class that they applied it even after the end of the project. This indicates that pupils developed a collective identity in a micro-class level. One of the groups had also decided that they could all give help to their teacher whenever he needed or asked them. All groups in the class accepted the specific group's proposal and worked when and how they could help their teacher. The issue of classroom discipline problems was raised in the discussion within the groups and each group produced a written agreement of ways to face discipline problems. A leader in the group who changed in a rotating system was responsible for following the rules of the agreement.

Another issue that was raised in the group discussions during the study of the first and second thematic unit was about 'us asking for help'. Pupils agreed that when they found difficulties during the lesson they would ask for help initially from their peers and then from their teacher. In this way pupils worked together in the class acknowledging their weaknesses and developing a sense of dependence on others if they wanted to move on easier in difficult situations.

Offering help outside their class and within the school environment was a next step to consider and discuss in the class. Pupils discussed in their groups whom they could help in the school and ideas came up focusing on the following people:

- Younger children in the playground during break times
- Children who bought snacks in the school canteen
- Bullied children.

At this level of actions undertaken pupils focused only on children and could not think any other people who might needed help. They all agreed that they should follow some rules in order to protect and help younger or bullied children in the playground or in the school canteen. Important to note is that the teacher intervened to remind them that they should agree on consequences in case any of the pupils of his class did not follow the rules agreed.

During the third and fourth thematic unit pupils in their groups had to discuss and agree on whom they could offer help in the local community. They concluded that people whom needed help according to their opinions were the following:

- Elder people who lived on their own

- Certain professionals who worked for the community (in this case agriculturalists in the prefecture whom they decided to help in order to plant new trees after the huge fires in the last summer)
- Corporations or interest groups that organised events and festivals.

When organising their actions, pupils came up with a circulated programme for every pair in the class in order to visit elder people twice a week and give them their help. This kind of help was limited to doing the shopping as some parents objected to their children visiting elder people and working for them in the afternoon. This was a limitation and an obstacle in allowing pupils to act as they had decided mainly due to the study commitments pupils had in the afternoon which did not come solely from the class teacher but also from private lessons in foreign languages, music and athletics. For the second group of target people the class wrote a letter to the Headteacher to request that all pupils in the school be allowed to spend a school day planting trees in an area nearby which the last summer's fires had destroyed. They communicated with the prefecture offices and under the guidance of an agriculturalist the whole school spent one day during the winter term in planting new trees. Regarding the third target group pupils from the class participated in preparations of the local carnival festival during the winter term.

During the fifth and sixth thematic units pupils searched on the internet for parts of the world distant to them. Every group had to decide on what area of the earth they would focus to agree on providing help and support. Significant to note is that some pupils insisted on finding poor areas of the world while some others were just mindless of the issue. Initially many of them were apathetic when looking at pictures in the internet with hard working children but later under their teacher's guidance they became sympathetic. They became responsible for attempting to contact people or organisations in order to establish a link with the target person or group of people to help. Eventually they managed to write up a letter of protest for child labour and exploitation. Even though only one group in the class succeeded in contacting an organisation in the world for children's rights, they all observed shocking pictures in the internet about children in the third world countries and during class discussions on children's rights their emotions were activated to sympathise with the suffering, misery and pain in children's lives. It can be also a success of this approach that many pupils became more sensitive to real pictures of children in the neighbourhood or the local community who suffered and they had ignored or not paid attention to them previously.

Once pupils had agreed on whom and how they could offer their help in any of the circles / levels of participation (i.e. school, local community and distant communities) then they had to follow the established social behaviour regardless of the timing of the planned activities. In other words none of the pupils or the teacher stopped helping in the class when it was needed even though they had moved to studying and working on helping people in the local community. The actions undertaken became part of the daily behaviour in the class culture. Children were acknowledged as school citizens with a voice expressed in school and in the local community.

Conclusion

Concluding, the present study aimed to illustrate how P-BL can foster values, concepts and actions of citizenship education as they both share a common principle: active pupil participation. Authentic P-BL requires pupil participation in planning and organising their learning which is directly linked to real life. Citizenship education in the hidden curriculum requires pupil participation in school life and taking on roles and responsibilities. The citizenship education approach in this primary school class embraced a whole-class pupil-centred methodology and pupils' everyday experiences of school and community life. Citizenship education became part of the ethos of the class and was extended to the school life. A class culture of peer support and help was created and children gradually took a responsible part in the school life and then in the community real life. Through the P-BL a citizenship scheme of work was integrated in the class environment and later was extended to partnerships with members of the local community. Children developed strong social responsibility within the class, the school and the local community. P-BL met a fundamental principle of citizenship education: enactive learning and participation in micro- and macro- levels of real life.

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