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Citizenship promotion opportunities: reflections on the Comenius project ‘Me and My Europe: Intercultural Challenges of Modern Pre-primary Education’

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Abstract

This paper reflects the promotion of citizenship by Comenius project. Citizenship promotion guidelines for preschool education by CiCe documents on preschool pedagogical process by Latvian Ministry of Education and Science have served as the theoretical basis for the research. The contents of the Comenius project “Me and My Europe: Intercultural Challenges of Modern Pre-Primary Education” (implementation period 2012-2014) maintain Citizenship promotion in nine states (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Island and Turkey). The global experience in citizenship attitudes preschool teachers gained by participation and observation in versatile team workshops in Latvia, Estonia, Island, Portugal, Turkey, Spain and Italy such as: I and my folksong, an integrated workshop ‘The Sea’, folk instruments and folk music, drama performances of fairy tales, floral motives, typical dishes, the most popular folk dance etc. are analysed. The changes in the attitudes of the project participants to themselves, the nature, work, their state and the experience gained in this Comenius project were established by help of discussions and questionnaire. Findings show that the project served as a means for participants to explore personal understandings of their own country, to learn about culture treasures in other countries, to promote transnational collaboration, and potentially to enrich experience for teachers, parents and children.

Keywords: *attitudes, Comenius project, methods and forms, citizenship, collaboration*

1. Introduction

This paper reflects on a Comenius multilateral project, ‘*Me and My Europe: Intercultural Challenges of Modern Pre-Primary Education*’, implemented 2012-14. Part of the Lifelong Learning Programme, Comenius focuses on the first phase of education, from pre-school and primary to secondary schools, and seeks to develop knowledge and understanding among young people and educational staff of the diversity of European cultures, languages and values. It helps young people acquire the basic life skills and competences necessary for their personal development, for future employment and for active citizenship. Specifically the programme was designed to:

- Improve and increase the mobility of pupils and staff across the EU in different Member States;
- Enhance and increase school partnerships across the EU;

- Encourage language learning, innovative ICT-based content, services and better teaching techniques and practices;
- Enhance the quality and European dimension of teacher training;
- Improve pedagogical approaches and school management. (*Lifelong Learning Programme*. http://ec.europa.eu/education/tools/lip_en.htm#tab-3)

Comenius Multilateral Projects are undertaken by consortia working together to improve the initial or in-service training of teachers and other categories of personnel working in the school education sector to develop strategies or exchange experiences to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom.

The compulsory education primary school 'Ridze' gained the right to organise the Comenius Multilateral School Partnership 'Me and My Europe: Intercultural Challenges of Modern Pre-primary Education' from August 1, 2012 till July 31, 2014 and they involved into the project eight other countries as well. In the framework of the project seven meetings were organized: in Riga, Latvia; in Keila, Estonia; in Akranes, Iceland; in Sintra, Portugal; in Istanbul, Turkey; in LaGrange (Logroño), Spain; and, in Grosseto and Paganico, Italy. In total 1334 respondents participated in the project: namely, 128 preschool teachers and 1206 preschool pupils. At the workshops and labs the representatives of each country showed appropriate samples for preschool age children, which fostered the children's development and transnational experience.

2. Citizenship promotion content of the Project

Citizenship content of the project drew on guidance both from CiCe and Latvia Education and Science Ministry. In the Guidelines for Preschool teachers our CiCe colleagues write:

One of the aims of the early childhood program should be to teach the child to become an active citizen in a way that does not conform to their surroundings, but is imaginative and exploratory... Early childhood institutions that exercise a democratic pedagogy give children the sense that everybody is part of society, and that they are valued and have a say. (Dyrfjord et al, 2004, p. 4).

They recommend to discuss all necessary questions with preschool children. In the documents of Latvia Education and Science Ministry we can find:

The aim of the pre-school education programme is to promote the development of human and responsible individual personality, to encourage the formation of inquisitiveness towards individuals, environment and society and its diversity and unity. The main type of activity for a pre-school age child is a play, therefore the teaching process is arranged in such a way that children learn by playing. 5-7 year old children have to participate in pre-school programmes provided by general education establishments or kindergartens as a part of the compulsory basic education. The objective of the pre-school education is to foster general development of children and their readiness to enter primary stage of the basic education. (*Pre-school education*. ISCED level 0,

<http://izm.izm.gov.lv/education/education-system.html>; *The education system in Latvia*. <http://izm.izm.gov.lv/education/general-education/pre-school.html>)

In order to realize the citizenship promotion content the work was organized through two laboratories at each meeting (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comenius project's art labs and intercultural workshop

Country	Art Lab	Intercultural workshop
1. Latvia	My country	My folk songs
2. Estonia	Winter	My folk games
3. Iceland	The Sea	My national outdoor games
4. Portugal	Recycling materials	My folk music and musical instruments
5. Turkey	Flowers	My national fairy tales (drama, theatre)
6. Spain	My national meals	My folk dances
7. Italy	Education System of Italy: from preschool education till social activities	
Poland	My European Book – presentation	
Lithuania	Project's Website – presentation	

Afterwards the techniques learned during the Art Lab were disseminated and included into the pedagogical process of each preschool participant. Each tried to create something original. For example, various techniques of creating floral arrangements (Turkey) and Art Lab (Portugal) promoting use of recyclable materials should be mentioned. Incorporating individual participants, creativity was a feature of the project.

The first meeting was organized in Latvia where the project action plan was discussed. Although the plan developed clear and explicit actions, the teams welcomed frequent instruction and guidance. However to promote democratic communication, it was important to also stress creative, self-dependent and responsible activities by each participant country. Participants gained experience of work procedures at the *Laisma* kindergarten in Riga, where the Michaelmas festival was celebrated. They could taste honey with Latvian rye bread and herbal tea! The folk music laboratory involved the participants in learning of two Latvian folk songs *Lācītis kāpa ozolā* (Little bear climbed up the oak tree) and *Ko mēs labu stādīsim* (What shall we plant now). At the social programme a folk instrument ensemble showed the art of playing *kokle*, the Latvian national music instrument, introduced with folk traditional songs and dances, involved into active dancing of all Comenius project participants! Other cultural exchanges included a guide to Art Nouveau architecture on Alberta Street and the pearl of the World Culture heritage – Old Riga.

For the Estonian Art laboratory presentations were themed around 'Winter'. Preschool teachers and children were involved in the programme. Again cultural exchange was a feature of the programme which included the presentation of two play-songs. Also, prior to this meeting all the teams worked out a logo for the Comenius project logo made in Iceland selected to be the project's logo (below) as in reflected both international cooperation and the project's pedagogical ethos of collaborative learning.



Project's logo

The meeting in Estonia also reflected on what had been accomplished and the programme for the meeting in Iceland was further refined. Here the same format of cultural exchange and themed workshops was pursued. Having established positive working relations between partners at previous meetings, and in refining our approach, we were able to focus more explicitly on pedagogy in relation to citizenship. We observed how self-dependence was fostered in the kindergarten and the pupils' self-dependence and responsibility was encouraged at school. Iceland's specifics are parent co-ownership about their child beginning from the preschool and throughout the school graduation. The parents are responsible for the pupils' performance at the school, not the teachers. The breaks at the school are meant for the teachers' recreation and preparation of materials for the next work session. The senior pupils take care of the junior pupils. So the social skills are developed.

Similar formats and observations were made at other meetings in other participant countries.

3. Outcomes of the Comenius project

We are in the process of drawing and summarising of the project's results and outcomes presented here are seen as initial observations.

From the discussions with the partners of the project we could conclude that every participant of the project: the children, the teachers, the parents, gained much. Their experience was enriched with respect to culture and understanding of education practice in the participating countries. The children learned folksongs, folkdances, drama, playing of the folk instrument of other nations. For example, in music sessions children were involved in simultaneous activities: they sang songs and coloured flags, and prepared greetings for participants arriving from other countries.

Participation of parents, for example, in Latvia parents accompanied their children to gather nature materials at the beach in Jurmala, and by giving their photos to be included

in the presentation 'Me and My country', was seen as being particularly important to active participation and in taking learning beyond the kindergarten.

For the children use of other languages was seen as significant to developing their emerging inter-cultural understanding. The children painted and coloured with great passion, sang, danced, made greeting cards and posters, Christmas seasonal greetings, learned how to greet and welcome the Comenius project participants in their languages and in the English language.

Participant evaluation of the project meetings was mostly positive. Typical answers to the question about the atmosphere during meetings were: 'The atmosphere during the meetings was really nice and aesthetic. Everyone was very friendly' which suggests the importance of establishing a stress-free environment for inter-cultural exchange. However, some participants were concerned over the balance between creating a positive environment and the time spent on the content of workshops 'The working atmosphere was good but it felt like that we had a little time for doing the work'.

With respect to specific workshops satisfaction was generally high. The professionalism of staff involved in their preparation was praised and the content described as 'varied and very enriching.' What seems to be particularly seen as a positive outcome was learning through inter-cultural exchange through art, drama, music, visits etc. with one participant commenting 'Getting to know other cultures is very important in this project, so that we can transmit them in our schools'.

Discussions with teachers, the parents and the children showed general consensus that the Comenius Project helped to improve competences and communication skills. For the children, improvement in knowledge of the cultures of partner countries was noted as was the acquisition of language knowledge and use of other languages. Some colleagues felt that the project had helped the children they work with to realise a higher level of creative self-expression in singing, dancing and theatre and thereby giving confidence. With respect to citizenship education, and with reference to CiCe guidelines this is seen as important in that it helps to build imaginative exploration and the sense that everybody is part of society, and that they are valued and have a say. Moreover, the development of intercultural understanding is premised on inquisitiveness towards individuals and society and its diversity and unity (Latvia Education and Science Ministry). Interestingly, the teachers also reported on personal development in relation to language and communication skills as well as cultural knowledge and understanding.

The Comenius project '*Me and My Europe: Intercultural Challenges of Modern Pre-primary Education*' served as a means to explore their own country, to learn about culture treasures in other countries, to promote transnational collaboration, and to enrich experience of the teachers, the parents and the children.

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