

Citizenship education in the modern multicultural kindergarten: Social issues and social action. An action research¹

Konstantina Strantzali & Konstantinos Tsioumis

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate and define the extent to which citizenship education can be achieved in the multicultural kindergarten classroom. The survey conducted in a Greek multicultural kindergarten, was based on citizenship education activities and proves that kindergarten students can negotiate critical social issues, take initiatives and make decisions on particular subjects of their concern. Young children's involvement in school community - related issues and the wider social environment, such as the effects of war, the refugee issues, the protection of socially vulnerable groups, animals and the planet, can be the springboard for cultivation of universal values and social consciousness. Dealing with social issues of contemporary reality, kindergarten children can undertake social action, develop problem-solving skills and cultivate values such as solidarity, empathy, justice, moral self-development, equality and respect for diversity. This research is a practical demonstration of citizenship education effectiveness in promoting active, democratic, creative and critical thinking future citizens.

Keywords

political socialization, citizenship education, kindergarten, social action, active citizen

Introduction

In the contemporary world, where the crisis of values prevails, pre-school education and training may be catalytic in shaping tomorrow's active citizens and promoting active social participation. The dialogue concerning citizenship education from the preschool age has not been particularly flourishing and it has been a source of deep concern as it is argued that young children do not enjoy full

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political rights (freedom of vote, property) so the term moves to a theoretical level (Milli-Impre, 2009; Nickols, 2007). However, modern childhood sociology perceives children as competent and active citizens today (Phillips, 2011), which means that citizenship education at a preschool level can be the balm of social deregulation and confutation of universal values and can contribute to the formation of sensitized, active and responsible citizens.

Child involvement in problematic situations is considered to be necessary for the purposes of learning how to be a citizen (Phillips, 2010). The better understanding of the problems and the civic world in general is achieved through the coexistence of children at school (Tsioumis, Kyridis, Papageorgou, Sotiropoulou, 2015). However, the process of learning how to be an active citizen is complex and endless, it starts from a very young age and it continues throughout a person's life (Keser, Akar & Yildirim, 2011).

Citizenship education starts from the age of 5-6 years, when children can participate in group activities of their interest, can share responsibilities, and can plan and cooperate with each other (Oikonomidis & Eleftherakis 2011). When children are involved in the problems of their communities, their voices become stronger (Phillips, 2010). By articulating and discussing their ideas, children are able to solve problems and plan the course of learning. Additionally, by taking responsibilities within groups, pupils participate in a democratic society (Seefeldt & Barbour, 1998; Oikonomidis & Eleftherakis 2011). According to Danner & Jonyniene (2012), the kindergarten is a place where children can experience the principles of democracy and democratic decision-making. In the preschool class, children have the opportunity to express their opinions, listen to others, participate in decision-making and learn about the principles of democracy. By participating in the life of a community where rights are respected and democratic relationships dominate, children learn that their decisions play a considerable role in the success of both personal and collective goals.

According to Bigelow (1993), infants formulate stereotypical views about civilizations and cultures that are different than their own, especially when they are not involved in activities that help them to realize that the different is not rejected (Ntinas, Vamvakidou & Kyridis 2002). Nowadays, in kindergartens that are overwhelmed by foreign infants, it is a unique opportunity to build an open and tolerant citizens' conscience that it will form the basis for an open and tolerant society (Nicolaou, 2005).

A kindergarten class is considered a place where children from different environments meet and communicate for the first time. Such a kindergarten is considered a suitable environment for children from different backgrounds to interact, play, discover as well as design and develop a clear concept of "belonging" to a group. Children become members of a group in a context of mutuality, yet they differ from one another because of their individual background. This diversity gives children the opportunity to have multifaceted experiences. Thus, kindergarten offers both knowledge and opportunities for

negotiation and appropriation of social norms and values with which children develop the necessary social relationships and knowledge that will help them easily adapt to life (Koutsouvanou, 2005).

In the context of citizenship education, the harmonious coexistence of members of a multicultural community, dominated by the principles of human rights and universal human values, is envisaged. Students should therefore acquire the knowledge and skills that are necessary to become effective citizens of the global community (Banks, 2008). The values conveyed through citizenship education include the defense of human rights, social responsibility and obligations towards others, especially in terms of equality, diversity and minorities (Ross, 2012).

Methodology

Research Aim and Specific Goals

The purpose of this research is to study whether a well-organized educational intervention, consisting of appropriate educational practices and teaching strategies, can support effective citizenship education for children of a preschool multicultural class.

Furthermore, specific goals will examine whether it is feasible, in a multicultural kindergarten to achieve the following: a) cultivation of solidarity, social values and acceptance of diversity through the exploration of social issues, b) taking action and initiatives to solve problems, c) arranging the concepts of democracy, equality, justice, human rights and freedom of speech through dealing with crucial affairs, d) growing moral and social consciousness, e) cultivation of active empathy and mutual respect, f) active participation in discussions and decision making initiatives, g) enhancing collaboration for collective action.

Research Hypotheses

Prior to the implementation of the action research in the multicultural kindergarten, we made some assumptions by taking into consideration the principles of pedagogical theory, the limitations of the pre-school age as well as the particular school environment we chose to take care of.

Based on the parameters written above, we have formed a series of educational activities, anticipating the achievement of our learning aspirations. We assume, therefore, that in the course of the activities, kindergarten students can:

- Participate in discussions and dialogues and express their thoughts and feelings.
- Identify problems, propose solutions and take action to address them.

- Cooperate, take initiatives and develop minimum arguments.
- Cultivate moral and social consciousness through their involvement in issues related to refugees, peace, diversity and the local environment.
- Develop values of solidarity and social support for people in need,
- Understand fundamental concepts such as democracy, equality, justice, freedom of speech and their rights.
- Exercise active empathy and mutual respect.
- Consider the existence of rules as a prerequisite for the harmonious coexistence among the members of a community.
- Understand that non-participation might have an adverse effect on them.

Research Method

For the purposes of this study, we chose action research –a method that opposes the passive role of teachers and strongly supports the dominance of the teaching-research movement (Dalkos, 2001). It is a qualitative method of research aiming to the prompt improvement or resolution of problems related to educational issues. The purpose of this dynamic research process is the change through interventions in social situations (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998; Dalkos, 2001).

Educational researchers (action researchers involved in education) participate in all phases of the research process, either by conducting their own action research or by being members of a research team. They play a central role in the research process, formulating not just their view of the educational work and the problems they encounter, but they also intervene in the shaping of the research program and actively participate in the entire process of reflection, which either relates to hypotheses and strategies of action or their practice and interference as well as to the assessment (Tsouph & Katsarou, 2003).

According to Poch (2003), action research expects the students' involvement in a process of ongoing interaction, in which they jointly review their activities together with the teachers. This enables students to engage in authentic collaborative processes and reap the benefits. Several studies (Jensen, 2000; Barrett, 2008; Hart, 1992; Rudduck and Flutter, 2000) suggest that action research offers the methodological framework that requires students to critically think the actions they are undertaking and therefore observe and reflect on their participation in them. For this reason, it is considered particularly necessary to involve students in the process of making all the important decisions that arise at school during the learning process and the conditions of their activity (Katsenos, Fologitis, Liarakou, 2015). However, active participation of children in school-related issues cannot be imposed nor taught as an abstract concept. On the contrary, it is feasible to be cultivated

progressively as an ability through familiarity with original participatory activities (Schnack, 2008; Hart, 1992; Katsenos, Fologitis, Liarakou, 2015).

The educational intervention of this research was implemented in a public kindergarten in Thessaloniki, Greece and lasted five weeks. Three out of all children were Albanian and Armenian. Prior to the implementation of the action research, students' interests, cultural experiences, capabilities and skills were taken into consideration in order to create a learning environment that promotes equal opportunities and provide the appropriate stimuli for the building of the learning. The themes of the activities alternated constantly according to the interests and wishes of the students, during the course of the intervention.

Description of activities

Introductory activities

Prior to the implementation of the main activities, two introductory activities were carried out. The first one, called "My Beloved", gave students the opportunity to talk about themselves, express interests and preferences, in order to give emphasis to the existence of diversity and the uniqueness of each student. At the same time, the above self-presentation activity attempted to familiarize students with listening and speaking skills in a discussion. The second activity, entitled "One Place for All", was designed to develop students' cooperation, team-working skills as well as their sense of fair play. Through this activity, the students were physically placed in the hands of their classmates; thus enhancing trust and cooperation among them. At the same time, they experienced the significance of the notion of "sharing" and realized that mutual aid and cooperation are basic components in order for a group's goals to be achieved.

Main activities

"The courtyard of the school"

The purpose of the first activity was to put students in a state of active participation and mobilization in order to be properly introduced to the climate of the actions they were to carry out. Furthermore, set as primary objectives, the students of the kindergarten were to become familiar with free expression and the decision-making process, act collectively in order to improve the conditions of their school community as well as cultivate their responsibility and critical thinking.

During the development of this activity, students were asked to identify and analyze problems of their school environment and were invited to seek ways to deal with them. In a pleasant atmosphere, the students

expressed their opinions and feelings, worked collectively to improve the conditions of the school community and took the responsibility to correct any problems. Some of the children's views were *"Our yard, does not have trees and flowers," "It has many stones and we hit when we fall"*.

Initially, the pre-school teacher encouraged the students to express their views on possible unpleasant issues they find in their school community. Among other things, students showed particular concern about the issue of the school yard. As they analyzed the disadvantages of their yard and compared it with other schools, they were then encouraged to think about how to deal with the problem. Then, students were prompted to capture the yard they dreamed about through drawings or plastic cubes in order to express their expectations in a pleasant way. However, in order for students to be well-prepared and accurately report on the problems of the yard, they were divided into groups and went out of the classroom to record all its problems. Three groups were created. One for the identification of the problems, another one for listing them and a third group to take photographs.

Then, as it was suggested by the children during the initial conversations, they created a poster with slogans in order to inform other people about their problems and to ask for their help. The content of the poster came out of suggestions, ideas and co-decisions among children. Students took the initiative to hang the poster at the entrance of the school in order to be easily seen by the bypassing crowd, to acknowledge the problem and make them offer help.

In addition, through discussion on further ways of addressing the problem, students decided to send a letter to the mayor of Thessaloniki, which reported on the deficiencies of the school and asked for assistance. The students submitted their views on a letter and the teacher wrote them down on paper.

Finally, students were divided into groups and used the classroom's desktop to search for information on the Internet in order to see how yards of other schools are. Through this process, they found pictures of courtyards in a much better condition than their own but also discovered cases of African students who had outdoor lessons because there was a complete absence of school infrastructure.

A brief discussion on the reasons why some children do not have the opportunity to go to school became the bridge for a smooth thematic transition to the next activity, which is related to two diachronic issues: migration and refugees.

"Little Children's Odors"

The main objectives of the second activity were for the students to know the reasons why refugees and migrants leave their home countries, to cultivate empathy, to be concerned about the reasons for the rejection of "the other" as well as to understand the importance of social acceptance. In addition, the development of solidarity through action to provide help to "socially vulnerable groups" was also sought.

At first, the pre-school teacher read a fairytale titled "Little Children's Odors" by Victoria Bandi under the auspices of the UNHCR, which stated the unfavorable reasons of migration for some families to other countries. During this activity, children from Albania and Armenia were given the opportunity to talk about their countries of origin.

After reading the story, the teacher asked some questions to the students in order to detect their feelings and attitudes towards people from other countries. Students' desire to help poor children in need emerged out of the discussion.

In this context, the creation of a corner inside the classroom was suggested by the students, which would include whatever a child belonging to socially vulnerable groups needed. Out of the three proposed names, the majority decided on "The corner of friendship" as the name of the new corner in the classroom. In addition, the students were divided into two groups. The one for the purposes of finding the appropriate space to set up "The corner of the friendship", and the other one to write and draw on a paper the name of the corner, so as to place it in the particular place.

In addition, students searched for photographs in magazines at home or on the internet, depicting people in adverse living conditions, and put them in the "Corner of Friendship", so that they never forget the reason for their creation. Furthermore, the students created appeals in order to raise awareness and ask their relatives to help people in need. Thus, each student created his own appeal by signing it (name and signature); thus, promising to take care of helpless people. It should be mentioned that students collected more signatures from their relatives or friends who committed themselves to helping socially "vulnerable" groups.

"The hunted peace"

The thematic framework of the above activity focused on the unfavorable factors that forced refugees and migrants to leave their homelands. Dealing with unfavorable factors led to the discussion of other social problems, such as poverty, child labor, inability to attend school, etc. The third activity focuses solely on refugee issues and aims to sensitize students on an actual problem that had preoccupied many people in their

country at that time. Another aim of this activity was for students to take individual and collective responsibility to improve the quality of life of refugees in Greece as responsible citizens, to develop social consciousness through action as well as to familiarize themselves with the concept of volunteering through assistance and support.

Initially, a cartoon video titled "Peace, the life of a refugee" by UNHCR was screened on the classroom's computer. After the end of the video, a discussion about the content of the book took place. Through the discussion, students gained more knowledge, expressed their views and feelings about the tragedy of being a refugee. In addition, the children expressed their thoughts on the concepts of war and peace, which were written down on two sheets of paper. In the end, the desire to collect products and donate them to the refugees living in Greece emerged. Some of the students' ideas were *"Refugees have been swimming for days - get them water and food, they're tired - we could give them our pillows, our toys to play so as they won't be afraid"*.

The students took rapid action and decided to create a poster asking other people to help. They were divided into groups of three, used supermarket brochures, cut the products they considered essential for the refugees and stuck them on the poster. With the help of the teacher, students tried to find and cut appropriate products that could be preserved such as water, milk, sanitary products, medicines etc. After the products were glued to the poster, children separated into two groups, decided on the title of the poster as well as the side of the school building they would hang it on. Therefore, with the slogan, "We're collecting products for refugees," the poster was placed outside the school for better visual access to passers-by. Under the poster, a box was placed so that the products could be collected.

In addition, the students visited the classroom's PC to learn about other peoples' contribution to the refugee crisis and entered the nomination competition to win the Nobel Peace Prize. After being informed about the importance of the Nobel Peace Prize, they launched peace competitions inviting students from other classes to participate in the collection of products for refugees, and they also established awards each month for the most peaceful student of the class.

Finally, the gathered products were transferred to a non-profit organization's offices and were offered to the refugees who were trapped at the borders of Idomeni.

"The strays"

The goals of the fourth activity were for the students to develop feelings of love and compassion for all the creatures of the Earth and to adopt caring and protective stances for the animals. In addition, they worked together in order to resolve issues that concern them, as well as take initiatives to solve a problem for the benefit of society.

Placing a stray cat in the box we used for refugee food gathering formed the bridge for the thematic transition to the issue of the stray animals in our neighborhood. Students started discussing about the causes of the existence of stray animals, the dangers that arise for both humans and the animals and came up with ways of solving this problem.

Through the discussion, the students suggested ways to tackle the problem and took action. Thus, they were divided into three groups. The first had to build a house as shelter for the stray animals, the second wrote a letter to the animal welfare company to report the problem, and the third group created a poster with slogans. In order to create the shelter for strays, the members of the group found a large box and they painted it after they co-decided on the colors that they would use. The students of the second group expressed their views by writing a letter to the animal welfare company. The third group created a poster with paintings and slogans, calling people to help in their effort to improve the situation. In addition, students decided to bring plastic buckets from their home to fill them with water and place them in different spots of the neighborhood, so that the stray animals can drink and quench their thirst.

Then the students, holding the poster with the slogans and a megaphone, visited the neighborhood's park and protested about the problem, trying to sensitize passers-by. At various places in the park, they placed the plastic buckets after they were filled with water, and they left the shelter they built for the animals there. In the end, the students returned to their school, having substantially helped through their collective action, by informing people about ways to reduce the impact of the problem and improve the life quality of the strays.

“The classroom”

The objectives of the fifth activity are the following: to sensitize students with environment related issues and actively involve them in environmental protection, to act individually and collectively for the benefit of the community and to cultivate values that support sustainability and environmental consciousness.

While finding ways to solve the problem of stray animals in the neighborhood, children identified another problem: the lack of classroom material. This problem raised the issue of Recycling-Reuse. Through an

extensive discussion, students understood the importance of recycling, which served as an important incentive to recycle and reuse materials.

The students decided to take action in order to address both the environmental problem and the lack of classroom material. Hence, they decided to make ornaments out of recyclable materials to decorate their Christmas tree. Then, they used the classroom's PC to search for Christmas handmade crafts made from recycled materials. After choosing the crafts they wanted to create, they brought rolls of toilet paper from their homes and made their own Christmas ornaments. Since students have recognized the significance of recycling for both environmental as well as money-saving purposes, they decided to make a recycling bin in the classroom.

“All equal all different”

The objectives of the last activity were to encourage the students of the kindergarten to become sensitized towards the disabled, to cultivate moral and social consciousness, to develop values of acceptance of diversity and to act collectively and individually for the benefit of a social group. Students' occupation with recycling has been the bridge for a smooth thematic transition to the last activity of intervention, which focused on raising awareness for people with special needs.

The readout of a computer-based news that showed the struggles of a school's students to collect recyclable plastic caps for the purpose of acquiring a wheelchair and donating it to a person with mobility problems, initiated the activity. Through the discussion of this news, students decided to contact via email, a nonprofit organization, in order to get more information and help collect caps. Some other children's views on helping people with special needs were *"Let's make a stick for blind people"*, *"Let's sell our toys or paintings to raise money"*.

Afterwards, the students participated in a role-playing game "stepping in the shoes of people" with special needs. Thus, they were divided into three groups, one of which was trying to communicate through gestures, the other tried to paint with the mouth and the third had to walk with eyes closed. The third group that had to imitate the life of a blind, was divided into pairs of two, so that the one can safely guide the other. Finally, in order to help children with mobility problems students designated a place where they collected plastic caps for the purpose of donating a wheelchair.

The collection of plastic caps lasted for 2 months and then the bags were moved to the offices of the nonprofit organization.

Conclusions

Through the intervention that took place in the multicultural kindergarten, it is ascertained that the initial assumptions and objectives were satisfactorily fulfilled. More specifically, it is believed that a well-organized intervention, composed of appropriate educational practices and teaching strategies, has strongly supported the effective citizenship education for the students of this multicultural class. The evaluation of action-research activities has shown that kindergarten children can participate in discussions, express their thoughts and feelings and engage in dialogues. At the same time, kindergarten students were able to identify problems of their interest, examine them by identifying their causes and their effects as well as propose solutions and take action to address them.

Young children could also cooperate, promote team-work and collective action, take initiatives in a process of negotiating an issue as well as develop basic arguments to support their views. Moreover, it can be stated that through deep thinking, consideration and understanding of refugee issues, social injustice, peace, diversity and local environmental topics, students can develop moral and social consciousness. Furthermore, through their continuous friction with social issues, pre-school students can also develop values such as solidarity and support towards vulnerable groups aiming to improve the quality of their living.

It is therefore possible for students to practice active empathy and acquire feelings of protection, support and respect for their fellow human beings through social action. As ascertained by the implementation of the activities of this intervention, kindergarten students were able to understand some of the principles of democracy such as freedom of speech and expression, respect for diversity, the need to maintain equality and social justice as well as the importance of safeguarding human rights. Finally, kindergarten students are able to act responsibly in order to address a problem that concerns them and understand that their action can contribute to the benefit of a community, while their non-participation and inertia may have adverse effects to themselves and to their society.

More specifically, through the first activity called “the courtyard”, students discovered a problem related to their school environment and they were immediately mobilized in order to find the best way to prevent it. Within a team-working framework, where everyone was free to express his own opinion, they created a poster calling for supporters to join their struggle. Afterwards, they went out to the schoolyard, wrote down the problems they saw and committed themselves to improve its condition. The effort to improve the conditions of the school community was maximized through the call for help from the Mayor of Thessaloniki. Therefore, we would say that the first activity familiarized students with active action within a climate of cooperation, responsibility, collectivity and freedom of expression.

During the second activity called “Little Children's Odors”, the highly developed students’ awareness led them to the creation of a new spot in the classroom, that could be used by everyone as a place to support children in need. Students’ response was really heartwarming and the "Friendship Corner" was immediately filled with photographs -depicting refugees and children living in harsh conditions-, toys and books, notebooks and pencils as well as crafts and paintings. Students understood the causes of migration, developed sensitivity and cultivated feelings of empathy. At the same time, they developed feelings of compassion and solidarity, offering a place in their classroom to students of vulnerable groups who would potentially attend their school in the future. Through collective and individual action, students realized the significance of social acceptance for people from different backgrounds, and through the creation of appeals they were mobilized to spread positive meanings to other people as well. The fact that people in their close environment filled children’s appeals with signatures proves that the content of this action has been able to positively interest people out of the classroom context as well.

Through the next activity called "The hunted peace" students understood the seriousness of the refugee issue and realized the hardships and tribulations experienced by the refugees. They worked individually and collectively in order to provide assistance and support towards refugees through the process of product gathering. Therefore, they developed values of solidarity and social responsibility. We can also say that children's response to product accumulation was touching. Taking into account this active volunteer offer, students’ sincere sensitization towards such a social issue is apparent. In addition, through these actions, students developed positive attitudes towards social acceptance as well as realized that social rejection make people suffer. Finally, by condemning the war, it is believed that students have acted as responsible and solidary citizens, contributing in helping/assisting and taking personal responsibility for improving the refugees’ living conditions.

During the fourth activity named “The strays”, students cultivated ecumenical consciousness and compassion for all the creatures of the Earth. Through their active mobilization, they took initiatives and were involved in collaborative learning activities, while at the same time worked for the benefit of society. Furthermore, by addressing the issue of stray animals, the students were challenged to find ways to solve the problem, and as active citizens, they tried to positively influence others' perceptions and attitudes towards the strays. Finally, through action, students adopted favorable views and attitudes towards the protection and care for both animals and humans.

Through the activity called “the classroom”, students realized that recycling and reuse of materials could help both in the environmental relief from rubbish as well as in saving money. For this reason, they acted in favor of protecting the environment by making Christmas ornaments from recyclable materials, thus contributing to the benefit of both the school community and society. In a

pleasant and creative environment, they analyzed the problem with the lack of materials and succeeded in finding ways to confront it while developing environmental consciousness. Finally, they realized that their active involvement in issues affecting them, contributes to the enhancement of their quality of life.

Through the activity called "All equal, all different" students were sensitized towards people with special needs and made a great effort to collect plastic caps in order to help people with mobility problems. Through the imitation of the way-of-living of disabled people, children expressed their compassion and cultivated empathy. This resulted in their active action, which led to the accumulation of such a great number of plastic caps in the classroom that new storage areas were sought, since the initial place was full. In conclusion, students through their performance for the benefit of a group, developed values for the support of diversity, directly cultivated social consciousness as well as indirectly preserved environmental responsibility.

In conclusion, it is considered that this intervention did not place the students in a unilateral situation of being taught the principles of democratic behavior and the competences of the citizen. Instead, it enabled them to apply and practice all the attitudes and skills that characterize an active citizen of a society as well as realize the importance of active engagement. The class was transformed into a small democratic society, where students-citizens enjoyed all their freedoms, while they exercised their obligations. Dealing with modern social issues has served as a springboard for social action for pre-school children. But mainly, through this process the students cultivated universal values, developed skills, attitudes and a sense of individual and collective responsibility.

Consequently, the implementation of this action research led to the extraction of encouraging conclusions with regard to the practice and promotion of "active citizens" in the kindergarten, of course with room for improvement. It is therefore clear that a well-organized intervention, based on the principles of citizenship education, is capable of defining the foundations of democratic behavior and active citizenship in students' consciousness, the consolidation of which depends to a large extent on their future educational path.

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