



This paper is taken from

*Future Citizens in Europe
Proceedings of the fourth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2002

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 356 5

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Fumat, Y. and Maz, M. (2002) Young Europeans in the making - a three-country experiment, in Ross, A. (ed) Future Citizens in Europe. London: CiCe, pp 303 - 306

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit
- The University of North London (now part of the London Metropolitan University) for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the European Commission Department of Education and Culture for their support and encouragement.

Young Europeans in the making - a three-country experiment

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This action is presented as part of the COMENIUS programme on the 'Education Nationale' initiative. Over a period of three years, at least three countries have to take part in the programme. No movement of children is required: the teachers involved in the projects have to meet according to a calendar that they themselves define. The three countries concerned in our project are France, Italy and Spain, whose languages are very close to each other. The nursery school of Montpellier coordinates the project and is responsible for its realisation.

Each nursery school is located in a particular geographic area and has a school population with its own special characteristics.

- Montpellier (France): a nursery school in a priority education zone with 85% of children whose culture and mother tongue are not French (Moroccan families speaking their own dialects)
- Monza (Italy): a nursery school said to be “suburban” with a majority of children coming from the working class and all of them having school meals (there are a few foreign families)
- Puebla Del Rio (Spain): a nursery school in a rural environment where there are no foreign children.

Montpellier

After some written exchanges between the three schools, the teachers met in Montpellier in May 1998 to set up the project's major priorities, to define its main objectives, and to plan its development for 1998-99. It was decided that

we are going to create a story, dealing with an hero named EFI, with a common quest, and the outcome of a *livre-objet* for each of the three schools.

In Montpellier, we met two problems:

- What are the limits of adult's intervention in such a project?
- What is the possible degree of involvement for each school's level?

In Montpellier, we thought that all classes should participate, but that the work of writing should be done with volunteers from the upper classes, working with a voluntary schoolteacher. Furthermore, during this work, the main-point of communication was made within school itself for want of efficient means of communication, indeed, but also for the purpose of implying school itself in a better way.

Sevilla

The week we spent in Sevilla, in May/June 1999, allowed the teachers to display the three stories, and through them to realise the diversity of our pedagogical practices. It is also worth pointing out that three very different stories all had the same ending - the return of the hero to the school. Therefore it was proposed that we would all work on our school's daily life, its rituals and activities as a possible tool to make children aware of belonging to a common European school culture. Tales and nursery rhymes constitute a common

cultural heritage because, even if words, lyrics or rhythms can sometimes differ, we can observe unchanged aspects.

The other priority of the work proposed to the teachers of the coordinating school dealt with language: how could we make the others' language easily accessible to everybody? Initially we thought that we would be able to work on the search of a vocabulary common to the three stories, but this turned out to be too difficult, hence the necessity of a differently oriented work.

Monza

In May/June 2000 in Monza (Italy) our week together allowed us to elaborate the model of our trilingual 'casket' and to make it attractive and easy to manipulate for a five years old child.

2000-2001

The academic year of 2000/2001 was marked by the active search by the nursery school of Montpellier for a printer, an editor and broader institutional supports, with a view to the distribution and diffusion of 150 caskets to the three school partners in the project. On 19 May, on the occasion of *La Journée de l'Europe*, the casket was presented. A delegation from the City, the Academic Inspection and the House of Europe officials as well as the mayor of Monza came to our school. The casket included:

- a 48 card index dealing with everyday life in our three schools
- a 49 card index of keys giving access to the understanding of the three languages
- a game made from the three stories, with EFI as the hero.

Each of these three parts offer the opportunity for exploitation, completion and enrichment. Each language was assigned a colour: this allowed the children to know immediately 'where' s/he was and which language s/he is confronted with. The colour also permits the child to become implicitly aware of similarities and differences. At the same time we planned to create a CDROM with tales, games and keys for understanding to give the casket an oral dimension.

What conclusions can we draw from this experience, and where do these differences in teaching method come from?

The functioning of material

- The nursery school of Puebla Del Rio has no ATSEM at its disposal. Consequently, the workshop activities used in Montpellier and Monza proved to be very difficult for the Spanish teachers.
- In Monza, each class is lead by two teachers, who take turns during the day and have a two-hour shared time of work.
- In France each schoolteacher is helped with his work by an ATSEM who is remunerated by the City.
- No subvention from the City is given to the nursery school of Puebla Del Rio as it is the case in France.
- In Puebla and in Monza the number of children per class is not limited as it is the case in Montpellier.

Institutional Structures

Only the French nursery school functioned autonomously, having a headteacher who was responsible for the pedagogical life of the school. In Italy as in Spain, each schoolmaster is entrusted with the running of the school only during the academic year. The nursery school in Montpellier also had the advantage of unconditional support from the Academic Inspection of the City for everything the school wished to undertake.

Pedagogical Traditions

For the Montpellier nursery school and that in Monza, the story was created by the children, inspired by their own experience and everyday life related to the schools, but at Puebla the tale was entirely created, illustrated and written by teachers and then presented to the children with a view to diverse pedagogical exploitations.

Apprenticeship in the three languages

80% of children attending the nursery school in Montpellier are from foreign backgrounds and are not native French speakers. They have already encountered linguistic diversity since for them French constitutes a second language. Without generalising, we note that a certain number of these children displayed great enthusiasm and pleasure in manipulating these new languages. Nursery rhymes and situations of role-play are the activities that worked best; they prompted some children to reinvest their acquired experience in their everyday life (for example plays between children during breaks). We conclude that children performing in French as a second language were also those who were most active in the discovery of the partners' languages.

The nursery school child: European citizen?

COMENIUS programmes do not require children to travel between the countries participating to this project: the teachers assumed the role of relay between the schools of the three countries. The regular meetings and exchanges enabled the European pedagogical staff to become stable. At the time of writing we have spent a total of five weeks together and the priorities of this project were actually the same for the three schools.

Our main preoccupation has been to be in a position to make children aware of 'the reality of a somewhere else' - in this case the schools of our partner countries. In Montpellier, the celebration of the beginning of term through a release of balloons, favoured this work. Each year in October 180 balloons, each containing a message, are sent high up in the air. After a few days, a few weeks, we had received some thirty letters in reply to the messages in the balloons, which enabled us to follow the flight of the balloons on a map. We received all kinds of answers (from adults, children, schools ...). Our balloons are carried by the wind - in 2000 we even received a letter from the Italian border near the Alps. Children definitely enjoyed following their messages' journeys on a map and locating the place where the answer came from.

Regular exhibitions of these responses and their communication to children made work easy for them concerning the notion of citizenship in respect of our three schools' common everyday life, which for each school is made up of rituals like tales, nursery rhymes, feasts and parties, but also of activities such as drawing, painting ... the timetables, breaks, holidays and seasons - the habits and rules common to our three

schools - put rhythm into the schools' everyday life, and the sharing of these beyond borders, time and distances bring full meaning to our project.

The differences between our conceptions of school itself demonstrated their diversities. If school in France is founded on secularity, in Spain school is punctuated by religious celebrations. The diversity of our pedagogical methods proved to be very enriching for all of us. Whether they are teacher-led, as in Puebla, or individual (because based on experimentation) as in Italy or France, each of our different methods places children at the heart of their priority and aims at a same objective: to make children citizens of tomorrow.