

Awareness about diversity: a teaching proposal based on the project method¹

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Abstract

This paper presents a teaching proposal for young students aiming at experientially learning and accepting diversity as a social reality. The entire planning is theoretically framed by the principles of Intercultural and Inclusive Education, while practically it is materialized through the project method. The project entitled “Awareness about diversity” is materialized in the city of Patras (Greece) with 13 first grade students in a primary school, which is attended by both ethno-culturally different students and students with special needs. It must be noted that the project is part of a larger Inclusive Education program, which the classroom is part of through the cooperation of the Special Primary School for deaf and hard hearing students. The specific purpose of this project was for students to understand each one’s diversity and at the same time to realize that we are all equal and indiscriminately deserve acceptance and respect. The assessment so far reveals some encouraging data regarding the young students’ and future citizens’ empathetic capacity. It also reveals optimistic prospects for a broad and long-term implementation of similar teaching practices.

Key Words

Intercultural Education, Inclusive Education, Project Method, Experientially Learning.

Intercultural and Inclusive Education

Diversity concerns all of us, as each one's identity is a puzzle made up of our environmental, cultural, national, religious, social, etc. aspects of our life which

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contribute to the creation of our individual identity. At the same time, these elements make us parts of collective identities that coexist in the same place. Characteristic of human nature, however, is the fear of the unknown, the fear of the stranger - Other. From a perspective, the Other can be perceived in a monolithic way, in opposition to a stable integrated self. Or the Other can be perceived as dynamic, undergoing changes in the same way that the self changes throughout its personal and collective life (Bar-On 2008).

When diversity is distinct, it becomes easy to observe attitudes of suspicion, isolation, or even racist manifestations towards the different person or group of individuals that are united by their differences. Thus, we constantly witness ethnic, cultural, social, etc. groups standing in conflicting positions, which results in the creation of dominant and minority groups within a certain community. Likewise, empowering and cooperative relationships are formed between the groups, with the second ones being the desired objective for developing a multi-diverse society (Cummins, 2005).

This goal can be achieved through the educational process, making citizens active, fair and receptive. Public school systems are now obliged to effect the reproduction of conventionally accepted identities (Bash, 2011). However, in the era of globalization and interdependence we live in, there is a need for students to acquire additional competences so as to act in different cultural contexts and cooperate with different collective identities as future citizens. These competences need to be intercultural. They need to be based on the respect for human communities and cultural diversity, on the opportunity of encounter, dialogue and interaction, on the consideration that diversity is a potential for personal and social enrichment (Portera, 2014).

Intercultural education is linked to the teaching of human rights, the appreciation of diversity, the overcoming of ethnocentrism, the fight against racism and xenophobia (Μπερερής, 2001). At the same time, interculturalism refers to the entire educational process, since each school is potentially intercultural and is not characterized as intercultural by the fact that ethno-culturally different students are attending it (Νικολάου, 2011).

More specifically, the principles of intercultural education are set by UNESCO (2007) as it follows:

- Principle I: Intercultural education respects the student's cultural identity and provides them with culturally equivalent and qualitative education.
- Principle II: Intercultural education provides all students with cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills to fully interact and participate actively in society.
- Principle III: Intercultural education creates people who respect, understand and maintain solidarity towards other individuals and national, social, cultural and religious groups.

A condition for intercultural education is to create a democratic school, which will respect all students' rights and will provide them with equal opportunities to develop skills and adopt values like those mentioned above. Similar principles are found in the pedagogy of inclusion, which pedagogically approaches diversity as a link in the learning process.

Inclusion refers to human rights and allows school to respond and evolve to cover the needs of all students. In inclusion, the involvement of every person in the community is self-evident. There are no groups of students, but just children that make up the totality of pupils with different dynamics with each one of them having their own individuality. Thus, a school for all should be designed so that no child is separated with the excuse that they cannot keep up with the requirements of the school (Ζώνιου-Σιδέρη, 2011).

According to UNESCO's Guidelines for inclusion, it is viewed as:

a process" of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. [...] It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies. [...] is concerned with providing appropriate responses to the broad spectrum of learning needs in formal and non-formal educational settings. Rather than being a marginal issue on how some learners can be integrated in mainstream education, inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform education systems and other learning environments in order to respond to the diversity of learners. [...] aims towards enabling teachers and learners both to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment of the learning environment, rather than a problem (UNESCO 2005, pp. 13-15).

The excluded, in this case, are all those children and young people for whom teaching and learning do not satisfy their needs and their hopes and, for this reason, their lives are meaningful; this is a fact no matter how efficient and developed the educational systems are. (UNESCO IBE 2008, p. 10). Inclusive education calls for the acceptance and respect of variations within a school community (Bourke 2009). This model implies that all students physically belong to the same learning environment and, also, that each one of them has the right and must have the opportunity to actively participate in the community of their peers. Moreover, the inclusive education model links the problems associated with diversity within the social institution with the malfunction of the educational policy and practice, rather than blaming individuals for inherent variations in areas like ability, race, ethnicity and gender (Peters, Oliver, 2009).

Therefore, the Intercultural school should be able to apply the Inclusive education's principles with the assistance of a special educator, who is attending, helping and consulting the teacher and the teaching process. As a result, the education gets qualitatively upgraded and equalized for all students without categorization (Σούλης, 2008).

The project method

The school needs to adopt new teaching approaches and methods in practice so as to achieve a turn towards a multi-dimensional intercultural and inclusive education (Chrysochoos, Chrysochoos, Thompson, 2002). It is vital to transform the school classroom into a place of experiential learning, where students will be the main characters, where they will learn, create, judge and cooperate with each other and with their teachers.

The “Project method” is an effective and versatile teaching method that develops the experiential way of learning. It concerns an in-depth research of an important issue, which involves all members of the team. The students exploit, interact, cooperate, make decisions and act all together equally (Ματσαγγούρας, 2009, Νικολάου, 2011). Important issues of this method are the dialogue, an essential element for the group functionality and effectiveness, and the interdependence among the classroom’s members, because the success of one student depends on the collective group success (Ματσαγγούρας, 1995). The outcome of this method is the creation of high-quality pedagogical products made by the students (such as a book, an exhibition, a theatrical performance etc.) (Frey, 1986).

Furthermore, the purpose of the method is to learn more about a subject by exploring and meanwhile exploiting the existing heterogeneous potential of the class and developing their internal motivations rather than simply looking for correct answers to questions posed by the teacher (Νικολάου, 2010). Especially, in complex and diverse classrooms it is beneficial for both teachers and learners to research the knowledge together cooperatively, so as to ensure that all learners are able to participate in the complex processes of teaching and learning (Gardner, 2006).

Presentation of the project

The project entitled “*Awareness about diversity*” was materialized in Patras city (Greece) during the school year 2017-2018 in a school attended by several ethnoculturally different students. The classroom was compiled by 13 first grade students (6 boys and 7 girls). The students of the classroom were all Greeks; one of them, though, had a vision impairment. Regarding the working groups, they usually consisted of 2 or 3 students when it was possible due to their age (6 years old) and needed from the project’s activities.

The project is a teaching method that starts from a question that arises in the classroom (Χρυσ αφίδης, 2000). The described project was triggered by the cooperation that our classroom had with the special school for deaf and hard hearing students and the interest that our students demonstrated in diversity. When the students came in touch with the deaf and hard hearing students, they started wondering about the way they live, their interests, their school and their

communication through a different, but also Greek language. They also realized that there are other ways of being visibly different, apart from the vision impairment of their classmate. The impaired student realized experientially that there are many ways of being different and showed interest to learning more information.

So, the teacher of the classroom and me (I was the special education teacher of the classroom, helping the student with the vision impairment and the teacher) decided to devote 2 or 3 teaching hours per week and several months to this project, so as to achieve the maximum results of awareness for our students. We noticed that our students started asking for more information about how the deaf or hard hearing students live or why the foreign students of our school left their countries or even how their disabled classmate manages to attend the same classroom as them. They started noticing the diversity, so we decided to help them notice that even themselves are diverse from the others and that each one of us is unique. The project lasted six months (January - June). An exhibition and a small presentation of our project activities, constructions and photos were demonstrated by our students to their parents and the rest of the students and teachers of the school.

Purposes of the project

The main goal of this project was for students to understand human beings' diversity and at the same time to realize that we are all equal and indiscriminately deserve acceptance and respect. More specifically, we set several purposes so as to

- To make students aware of the size and the diversity of the world within and beyond the place they live.
- To realize and respect the diversity of the human existence.
- To communicate with each other and with students with disabilities without hesitation.
- To be aware that racist attitudes exist and to avoid them consciously.
- To evolve their interpersonal skills.
- To eliminate the fear for the unknown.
- To exercise their critical way of thinking and their creativity.

Indicative activities

Apart from being in touch with the deaf and hard hearing students and in order to achieve the maximum results from our project, the teacher of the classroom and I decided to plan some more activities. These activities would

help the students get in touch with other kinds of visible differences, like ethnic and cultural differences and non-visible differences, like aspects of our personalities. We also intended to trigger their interest, to make them express their opinions and questions as we wanted to adapt the project to their learning needs.

Firstly, we read several kids' books that refer to diversity, such as "Erithroulis, the little red star", where the hero experiences racism because of his different color and "Elmer the elephant", who disliked his colorful image and tried to get rid of it. After participating in role playing games, comparing the heroes with the reality and discussion, most students decided that would prefer to be Elmer rather than the unvaried grey elephants, even if they laughed at them. We studied the book "One for all and all for one" in which a group of different animals with different disabled ones become friends, help and complement each other. We also read the book "And the stories immigrate", so as to understand what immigration is. We immigrated like our Egyptian friend Fuazegia did and liked what our friend the sparrow, with the one white wing, does every year. After every story we made constructions and played role playing games for the cultivation of students' empathetic capacity. We became the heroes of the stories ourselves, we travelled, got sad and happy with them too. We also dedicated a wall of the classroom to our diversity tree, which the students decorated with the books we read and some of our constructions (Little red stars, sparrows with one white wing).

Moreover, we converted our classroom into a "diversity cinema" and we watched animation videos with the help of a projector. More specifically, we watched the short animation movies "Alike", "Esma alien" and "The something else", all referring to diversity as a fact and a sign of uniqueness to each one of us. Afterwards, we pictured the things that interested us and one of them was the moto of "The something else" hero: "We are different... Even better!".

We also learned some words in Greek sign language, like love, friendship, happiness, sadness, anger etc. We learned the alphabet of the Greek sign language and we created a three-dimensional wallpaper with it. The students got into the deaf students' shoes and with the letters of the word deaf – κωφός in Greek language – they wrote a message to the hearing people that said "I hear because I see. It seems hard, but it is not! I participate in everything just like you!". Afterwards, we visited the city's museum and saw a painting exhibition by deaf artists. The students were excited seeing the beautiful paintings made by "different" people.

Furthermore, we searched for information about students all over the world on books, magazines that their parents may have had at home and on the internet with the collaboration of the Computers' lesson teacher. The students gathered a lot of material (photos and information) and decided to make a collage entitled "students of the world" and hang it next to our

diversity tree. This activity created the opportunity to observe wellness and poorness in other countries' schools and afterwards to try to understand how difficult it is in some places for students to reach out their school or even have enough food and water to live.

We also seized the opportunity that the discussions about diversity gave us and we tried to find out the things that made every student in the classroom different from the others, even though they were members of the same team. Because of their difficulty to express themselves with words (due to their age), the students decided to picture themselves at first and their classmates afterwards. We noticed that after our discussions and activities, most of them pictured each other with different colors or similar colors when they drew girls or boys.

These are some indicative activities that we did during the six months, but the largest one was implemented at the closing of the school for the summer vacations when the students exhibited and presented proudly their work in front of their parents and the rest of the school. The students were aware and very excited for this presentation during the project. They organized their small presentation with our help and decided that the closing message would be the moto of "The Something Else" hero: "We are different... Even better!"

Evaluation – Recommendations

Concerning the project's assessment, it appeared to be effective due to its long-term application in the classroom. The young age of the students and their vivid interest about the subject we researched were vital facts for the project's success and the avoidance of racist manifestations. Students were able to face diversity multi-dimensionally and effortlessly during the school year. In my opinion, the most important element of the project was the safety that the school context provided to the children to face the unknown - different without racist feelings and feelings of superiority. A helpful factor was also the coeducation of the vision disabled student in the classroom, which resulted to the students' interest and sensitization about disabilities at such a young age.

During this project, the students did not express racist views or comments. On the contrary, they started being more friendly and helpful to their disabled classmate, and inquiry about other aspects of diversity. It seems that they have understood that they live in a big team, where everyone is unique but so important that the team would be unable to work the same without them. Finally, I believe that this project would be even more efficient if the students kept contact with the "diversity" the next years through the school context. It would be very interesting to cooperate afterwards with the Intercultural school, or the Special school for blind students, so as to give students the chance to learn deeper that each person is unique and develops the abilities to live normally.

To conclude, it seems that the intercultural and inclusive classroom is a pedagogical approach able to eliminate racist attitudes and feelings of superiority in the school environment. The school should be one, united and not fragmented. Schools that represent a specific accepted collective identity should not exist, as school is the place that unites, cultivates communication and does not make discriminations on the basis of cultural and possibility criteria (Νικολάου, 2011).

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