

“A DIFFERENT HISTORY”- A WAY TO FORM INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES

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Abstract: *The article is focused on the effect of teaching, learning and assessing History in a different way, according to the values of postmodern society and students' needs to develop intercultural competences. The great intercultural potential of the History subject matter is well-known and teachers must become aware of this opportunity to form intercultural competences. “A different History” is an interdisciplinary optional course about local History, which aims to develop intercultural competences by using interactive strategies and invites students to exercise self-knowledge and deep knowledge of the other, acceptance and tolerance. It is necessary to redefine History teaching from a perspective much closer to the actual needs of society and to the students' psycho-individual profile in the knowledge society. This paper presents a concrete way in which high school students' may achieve intercultural competences through an optional of local history, which contributes to the development of identity and of the sense of belonging to the community as a prerequisite for developing a broader social identity. The practical conclusion of our entire work is evident: exploiting the intercultural potential of History can be achieved by offering motivating historical content, useful for students who will become citizens of a multicultural world.*

Keywords: *local history, interactive strategies, intercultural education*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the current socio-economic context, intercultural competences are real tools for adaptation, which improve employability in a complex and dynamic labour market in which interactions with other cultures will be more frequent, more profound, and more dynamic. The need for training intercultural competences in the contemporary society is undeniable, although many questions remain open on how the training of these skills can be done, such as:

(1) Which is the most effective form of education to achieve intercultural education: formal (in school, through "classic" subject matters with intercultural potential or through a distinct subject matter aimed directly and explicitly at training intercultural competences?), non-formal (associations, programmes/projects of intercultural education) or informal (knowing that many of the attitudes for or against interactions with "strangers" develop in family, during early childhood)?

(2) Who is to teach this subject: a teacher (but to what extent is the teacher of Geography, History, Arts or Physical education able to develop intercultural skills) or more teachers (how many, what specialization should they have)?

(3) How should we assess intercultural competences, given the fact that they "are to be tested" in concrete situations of interactions?

Here are just some of the open issues of intercultural education, which has become increasingly necessary and increasingly present in schools in Romania. Many studies about globalization (Ritzer, 2003, 2010; Voinea, 2012) concluded that society influence the way in which people define their own system of values, and that intercultural education and all humanistic subjects plays a decisive part in shaping and confirming the individual's system of values and identity.

This paper presents a concrete way in which high school students' may achieve intercultural competences through an optional of local history, which contributes to the development of identity and of the sense of belonging to the community as a prerequisite for developing a broader social identity.

2. A DIFFERENT HISTORY- A WAY TO FORM INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES

Tensions related to "local" – “global”, we - you can be overcome if students understand that personal / individual identity begins with the

profound knowledge of the community to which they belong, of the traditions, values and heroes of that community, according Hofstede's model (2002) and ending with the inclusion of "local" in the structure of global society, in which each community brings some specific "extra value".

The intercultural potential of History is very large, recognized by most experts in science education, but sometimes not enough exploited. This intercultural potential with large-scale formative dimension on the students' level can be maximally exploited if teaching History is done according to the constructivist paradigm (Siebert, 2000), where interactive methods, critical thinking, argumentation of the same phenomenon from multiple perspectives, integrated into the concrete reality of everyday life increase the formative impact of History.

Both science education experts and historians Căpiță L. (2005); Stradling (2001; 2014) have repeatedly emphasized the need to redefine History teaching from a perspective much closer to the actual needs of society and to the students' psycho-individual profile in the knowledge society. R. Stradling (2014) argues the need to teach "multi-perspective" history for the following reasons: a. historical phenomena can be interpreted and reconstructed from a variety of perspectives, depending on the subjectivity of the one interpreting, on the generation he is part of, on the culture in which he lives and on the dominant values in society at a time.

b. In the past, the mono-cultural, ethnocentric perspective dominated History teaching.

c. The need of school to prepare young people for a society where the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity is dominant.

All these arguments support the idea of approaching History in a *different* way. The same ideas are highlighted by a study initiated by the Council of Europe, concerning the initial training for History teachers. Among CE recommendations on teaching History in twenty-first century Europe we find following principle "reaffirming the educational and cultural dimensions of the major challenges in the Europe of tomorrow". In other words, History taught in a constructivist paradigm can develop intercultural competences as tolerance, empathy, critical thinking, and human solidarity.

How can we teach History differently? Firstly, a different History means new interesting topics (globalization, immigration, economic and social changes) or traditional topics seen in new perspectives - the role of local history, heroes and

traditional values in contemporary society. Today, local history is important because on one hand, it develops a feeling of belonging and, on the other hand, "students come to understand that groups have made a contribution to the history of the community as whole and are an integral part of community's past. They have helped to make the community what it is today" (Stradling, 2001:159). The local history can be taught (in Romanian schools) as optional course.

Secondly, a different History involves new teaching strategies and new technologies. The interactive learning strategies are very important for developing critical thinking and cooperation. Interactive strategies of learning can be use not only in the classroom, but also out of school (at museums, archaeological sites, medieval monuments, etc.). The partnership between museums and schools is a solution to make learning more efficient, especially as museums promote the so-called "museum pedagogy", through which they have quickly adapted to the new public (Voinea, 2004). History out of school offers many learning opportunities which motivate students and form intercultural competences. Using new technologies in teaching History can make it more attractive, with better educational results:

through access to such diversity of sources and perspectives, the Internet can also provide the history student (and teacher) with opportunities to practices the skills of historian (Stradling, 2001:171).

The assessment has an important role, too. Methods of assessment such as the portfolio are more adequate to evaluate competences and motivate students to progress. A portfolio for History can evaluate the critical capacities, the power of argumentations, the multiple perspectives, the depth of understanding, the individual's values and students' interest.

3. LOCAL HISTORY OPTIONAL - A PEDAGOGICAL RESEARCH

The main purpose of this research was to demonstrate the role of an optional course of local History in developing intercultural competences.

Methods: A questionnaire regarding students' attitudes on local history, the observation and a pedagogical experiment were used. A number of 100 participants were included in the study, all pupils in the IXth grade.

Research hypothesis: teaching – learning – assessing the Local History optional in the constructivist manner will lead to the training of intercultural competences (critical thinking, spirit of cooperation, tolerance).

The research concerned a total of 100 subjects, pupils in the ninth grade, 34 boys and 66 girls, distributed in two groups of students - a control group and an experimental group (which did not attend the Local History optional course).

One of the tools used in our research was a questionnaire aimed at the interest in local history, which was applied to both groups before and after performing the experiment. The results gathered using the questionnaire were correlated with data collected by other research methods used, namely, conversation, analysis of school documents and observation. The analysis of school documents was used in order to "measure" more concretely the subjects' statements. Thus, the school results in the Local History subject, called "The History of Brasov", were recorded along the school year. The observation was a method used frequently during the experiment. The content of the observations was the subjects' behaviour throughout the "The History of Brasov" classes (especially during the construction of parts of the portfolio). There was an increase in the number of active participants, the contribution, the cognitive and/or affective involvement, the attitude towards work done (incitement, captivation or carelessness, indifference), the spirit of cooperation, the ability to support one's arguments, the acceptance of different opinions.

The pedagogical experiment consisted in the design, implementation and assessment of an optional of Local History about Brasov. The optional called "The History of Brasov". Brasov, one of the major cities in Transylvania, has a specific history due to the ethnic puzzle and cultural and religious diversity. It is a good study case for what exercising tolerance and cooperation, openness to the "other" and accepting him mean.

The optional, which was conducted over one school year, included topics relating to the history of Brasov, about the written testimonies about it, the city's legends, personalities (men of culture, artists, journalists, religious and political personalities, etc.), specific cultural events. In the optional classes, teaching and learning were achieved by using interactive strategies, group work and methods such as: the mosaic, creative writing, debates, role play etc. The evaluation was carried out using the portfolio. Students in the

experimental group were announced at the beginning of the school year that they will be assessed through a portfolio, and its content and the evaluation criteria were clearly explained. The portfolio had to contain (at the end of each semester): Reading sheets (at least 5); Essays (at least 3); Test papers (at least 3); Drawings (optional); Biographies of local historical figures (optional).

The tasks had to be carried out individually or in groups. In developing parts of the portfolio, students were encouraged to use the Internet, to collaborate with people from the local community to gather various historical materials - photos of old Brasov, newspapers, or even specific objects (costumes of the "Junii" – a group of young men, specific to Brasov). The portfolio structure, as it can be seen, was chosen so as to succeed in capturing aspects of interest in local history. In addition to the "mandatory" pieces (essays, assignments), there were also introduced some optional elements to highlight the differences between students in terms of interest in the discipline, skills, attitudes, aptitudes and even personality traits. However, students were given the opportunity to put into your own portfolio the materials they deemed necessary and they thought those represented them best.

The analysis and interpretation of the results obtained by using the above mentioned instruments and methods show the increase of the interest in local history, the emergence of a sense of belonging to the local community, but also openness to cooperation, tolerance, critical thinking, which confirm the hypothesis of the present research. The interest in history was highlighted by several aspects: increased desire to read, to achieve higher grades in the History of Brasov subject, more complex and active participation in class, interest in the interdisciplinary aspects involved in historical texts. These issues have resulted from the difference in the results of two questionnaires applied before and after the experiment. The observations done while students were attending History of Brasov classes led to underlying the following aspects:

1. The number of people actively participating in class increased.

2. The attitude towards the class is positive, enthusiastic (students were observed before the beginning of class, during class and after its completion). It is worth mentioning that the students were looking forward for the class,

preparing their portfolio. They admired their colleagues' portfolios and sometimes exactly immediately after the class they began to work on something for the History of Brasov subject or continued certain discussions about a historic text or about the activity conducted, for example, a visit to the museum. It was also noted the students' originality in achieving the portfolio. Many students competed in achieving a portfolio as complete as possible, in a very creative manner. Thus, many students made drawings or collages on some historical texts, others took photographs of historic sights, accompanied them by specialized reviews, found links to other subject matters and highlighted these connections (with Literature or Geography).

The students showed a real spirit of cooperation and mutual help when doing the parts that requested teamwork. A formative effect mentioned by most students was the emergence of the feeling of belonging, often expressed as "Brasov, the city where I was born, is a diverse city with a rich history. I am proud to be from Brasov!". Students also noticed the intercultural dimension of Brasov: "my hometown has always been a special city, where people of different ethnicities and religions made it special, as it is today." Many students emphasized the practical side of this optional course. "When tourists or friends come from other cities I will be a good guide for them". The formative effects collected via the questionnaire and the observations are shown in the table below:

Table 1. The formative effects of the *Local History* optional course

The formative effects of the Local History optional course	Frequency
Feeling of pride / affiliation	87%
Utility	76%
Spirit of cooperation	45%
Interest in history	43%
Accepting different opinions	37%

4. CONCLUSIONS

From the research undertaken and the assessments made in the paper emerges the idea that the teaching-learning-assessing History differently, in a constructivist approach led to the development of intercultural competences necessary in contemporary society. The practical conclusion of our entire work is evident: exploiting the intercultural potential of History can be achieved by offering motivating historical content, useful for students who will become citizens of a multicultural world.

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