

EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP: THEORY AND TEACHING PRACTICE

Session 7 A PRESCHOOL EDUCATION-UTH

A Pedagogical Framework and Teaching Proposals for Teaching about Human Rights and Democratic Values in Kindergarten

Kostas Magos, Magda Vitsou

Curriculum

In most European countries, Early Childhood Education Curricula promote the development of basic social skills as defined by the countries' national and European policies. Among them are skills that pertain to citizenship and democracy (Engdahl & Losso, 2019).

Social skills help individuals to participate in social life, to co-operate, handle conflicts more effectively and resolve differences in a constructive way, to negotiate their viewpoints and build solid relationships. More specifically, citizenship skills facilitate individuals to participate fully in social life. They concern specific abilities, such as the display of solidarity, interest in social issues, responsibility for themselves and others, monitoring one's behavior and compliance with the rules. Children belong to a community - the school community. They have responsibilities, but also the right to participate, to create and build a learning culture (Sounoglou & Michalopoulou, 2017).

For the Early Childhood Education Curriculum to be developmentally appropriate and effective for all preschoolers, it should:

- set realistic targets and consider the needs, interests and abilities of children of this age
- adapt to the needs, skills and inclinations of every child with flexibility and secure the active participation of all children - for example, children with special needs or children with special skills
- provide opportunities to support all children's cultural identity and language
- rely on prior knowledge and past experiences and connect knowledge to daily practice at school



- reinforce children's interaction with one another, collaboration with parents and practitioners of other educational levels, and the opening of the Kindergarten to the community at large
- standardize knowledge and promote cross-curricular teaching
- stimulate interest in learning and promote knowledge, understanding and the development and cultivation of skills, attitudes and values
- encourage access to various sources of knowledge, to the choice and use of diverse material, to the approach and presentation of a diverse range of themes in many different ways
- provide children with opportunities to use their knowledge, practice their skills and continue to learn, thus promoting search, justification, critical thought, decision-making and problem-solving
- allow children to make mistakes, without pursuing the security granted by "correct" answers, and make good use of their errors according to the design of the educational work
- offer children opportunities, to develop and express ideas and emotions in many ways - through play, dramatization, writing, drawing, painting, etc.
- reinforce self-perception and autonomy
- support the role of languages across all curricula
- showcase play as the core of the whole curriculum
- incorporate technology, wherever possible, in various activities of the curriculum and tap into a variety of sources of information, such as the internet
- incorporate evaluation into the program schedule
- be renewed on an ongoing basis and correspond to the changing challenges of the times (Birbili, 2007)

It is of great importance that the educator be aware that organized activities do not solely have a cognitive content nor do they concern only the transmission of knowledge to children who are otherwise passive in the process - e.g. his/her giving exhausting presentations or practice activities with work sheets. Conversely, he/she should see to the fact that these activities become challenging to the children and secure their active participation. He/ She should promote the co-building of concepts through the team's dialogue and pursue the comprehension of phenomena in depth, the building of new concepts, the development of skills and the formation of attitudes. All of these can happen, when the practitioner: (a) knows what he/she wants to achieve through a specific activity or a schedule of activities.



In other words, he/she has clear objectives and organizes his/her action based on specific intentions; and (b) he/she acknowledges that human beings learn in many different ways and, depending on his/her goal-setting and children's needs, interchanges his/her didactic strategies. Thus, at times the educator serves as a role model, at times he/she encourages argumentation by posing appropriate questions or sets problems that need to be solved. On occasion, he/she gets to make a choice between individual and group work, to make decisions on organizing experiments and encourage social-dramatic play (Birbili & Myrovali, 2019).

Intercalating different learning areas (cross-curricular approach) in the context of an organized curriculum, combined with the planning of respective activities, gives meaning to concepts and phenomena. However, each cross-curricular plan should reflect the logical connections included in situations, issues and matters of life and the world in general (Katz, 2000).

The Project Approach

The Project Approach is a form of teaching approach and educational action that can be tapped into effectively in the Kindergarten, concerning students' education on issues of social skills and other matters in general (Katz & Chard, 2000). The main characteristics of a Project are the following:

- capitalizing on students' personal life- and other experiences
- students' co-operation
- differentiated pedagogy
- students as researchers
- cross-thematic approach
- connection between school and community

For a project to succeed, two particularly significant factors are relevant: on the one hand, it is the role of the educator and on the other, the classroom climate. When a project is carried out, the educator's role is mainly to uplift and coordinate the students, helping them to acquire knowledge through the investigative learning approach and to work effectively as a team, while securing a climate of mutual acceptance and respect. It is obvious that the educator himself/herself should possess the social skills he/she aspires to teach children about, so that he/she can assume the role of a guide and coordinator when carrying out projects that concern the teaching of social skills and values such as democracy. That is to say, he/she should respect children's rights, respect diversity, and not discriminate against any one of his/her students; his/her overall perceptions and attitudes should showcase the values of democracy and mutual respect at large.



As far as the classroom climate is concerned, it is necessary that the implementation of project-based learning plans should develop in a friendly atmosphere, where all students should feel comfortable, expressing themselves freely, without the fear of making a mistake and possibly being criticized (for it), while being able to display the different dimensions of their identity without reserve. A climate of mutual acceptance and support in the classroom is a necessary requirement for the teaching and learning of democratic principles and values.

The implementation of a project follows certain steps. The most significant of these are the following:

- Initiating students and beginning to raise their awareness

(the cause may be an incident inside or outside the classroom, a book, a film or other educational material, a world day etc.)

- Analyzing a theme into specific component parts/dimensions

(a common, effective way of a theme analysis is the 'spider web')

- Creating student workgroups, and the work of each team

(groups should be mixed and their composition should change during the project)

- Searching for resources and information

(through educational material and the internet, invitations to and visits by specialists, etc.)

- Synthesis of the workgroup material

(configuration occurs at regular intervals, so that all students can get the whole picture of the project's implementation process)

- Project presentation

(the project presentation can be delivered before all the students of the school, invited families and members of the community)

- Project assessment

(the assessment of the project is usually discussed; also, the focus group interviews method, as well as the children's project-based designs, etc. can be made good use of)

Utilization of the Project Approach in Kindergarten constitutes an educational practice, increasingly implemented in recent years. Most Kindergarten teachers have discovered the projects' actual effectiveness and the little students' interest in participating in them. Additionally, Preschool Curriculum Projects lead to the study of topics in depth through experiential learning. Children are encouraged to work in



teams, make decisions, understand knowledge and skills (Katz & Chard, 2000, Quennerstedt, 2016). The themes of human rights and democracy can be investigated in depth, in the framework of a curriculum project. A project can get underway through the preschool teacher's observation of behaviors and, over time, develop into a multi-dimensional, extensive research, through which children are offered an opportunity for "great experiences" and enhancement of their perceptions and attitudes (Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014).

Starting a project on diversity and democracy in Kindergarten

Before choosing the topic to elaborate on, we examine all the factors that may influence students' receptivity and acceptance. For instance, it is vital for us to know if there are any students experiencing discrimination or the deprivation of any one of their rights. Class management, relationships among students, the way the work is conducted and all the factors that make up the 'informal' and 'hidden' curriculum is our first priority (Katz, 2000).

First Step: Classroom Management

We organize the way of communication and cooperation with students in such a way that a climate of mutual respect is created. Little children may find it difficult to understand or put to use abstract concepts like 'rights, freedom, democracy', but they learn much more from experience and the context in which these are used. Activities, classroom climate and classroom management, relationships and the way of communication play a great role in developing a culture of respect for rights. Consequently, teaching about human rights in Kindergarten should aim at developing attitudes and skills and adopting values and behavioral patterns of respect and collaboration rather than cognitive goals (Katz, 2000).

Second Step: Developing Trust and Respect

We start with activities that will enhance students' feelings of confidence and trust: trust in the feeling of belonging and sharing - 'I belong, I share' - as well as enjoying others' respect for one's personality - 'my personality is respected'. Both of these feelings consist the foundation of the culture of human rights and democracy, and the educator's role in nurturing them is pivotal.

Even if one student in class feels he/she might become a possible target of derision or isolated from the group due to one distinct peculiarity of his/hers, or when he/she is afraid to express his/her opinion or his/her feelings, then, teaching about human rights loses its perspective. Prior to elaborating on a topic about human rights with our class, we dedicate a few sessions to securing a climate of trust (Engdahl & Losso, 2019).

Third Step: Experiencing Human Warmth



The number of students in class, minor everyday problems, and a great many demands from the social environment intensify work and render fewer opportunities for communication and reciprocity at school. In an effort to carry out the daily schedule effectively, educators frequently increase the time spent for schoolwork at the expense of emotional expression and development. Educators need to dedicate one hour per week to communicating and sharing personal anxieties and concerns as well as encouraging the group. In this way, they can build the appropriate foundations to teach human rights to children. The subject to be discussed is chosen by one member of the team each time the group convenes. The educator can prepare a topic that concerns the team or that he/she has observed. If, for example, a student is too shy, the teacher can pick a story or a fairy tale, or unobtrusively speak about a former student, and then ask the students to suggest ways as to how to encourage him/her. Children gain better knowledge of values, information or skills by participating in animated, warm social interaction and through affectionate, safe relationships. Knowledge coupled with feelings is experience with consistent, sustainable results (Engdahl & Losso, 2019).

Fourth Step: Social Justice in Class

The democratic function in class depends greatly upon the perceptions and skills that children have developed in regard with cooperation, decision-making, meetings, debates (comparing and contrasting), respect for another's opinion, as well as respect for the decisions the team makes. Without a shared perception about democratic function, the program 'education on human rights' is at risk of being wasted on the students' tendency for competitiveness and conflicting disputes (Gray, 2016).

Fifth Step: Discovering Differences and Similarities

A first approach to differences and similarities in Kindergarten can be made through a game, such as the following:

The children are sitting in a circle. One child gets up and stands in the middle of the circle, where he/she makes an announcement about appearance. For instance: "Those who are wearing sports shoes should get up!" Then, all those who are wearing sneakers, get up and exchange places in a very short time. The time may be measured by beating a drum or with one part from a song. The student who made the announcement must also find one seat. If someone is not seated, he/she has to stand in the middle of the circle and make a new announcement. When children begin to realize that they may share some similarities, but also be dissimilar in many ways, the game can take a new turn: children may delve deeper by making announcements concerning emotions. For example, "everyone who is tired right at this moment, raise your hand!" or: "all those who are happy, smile at the person next to you." However, at this point, the game may be spoiled, since it is difficult for the



children to identify such qualities at a glance. Therefore, it is better if a discussion takes place beforehand, so that children can understand how to recognize such qualities.

The discussion following this game should focus on subject matters concerning respect for a person's individuality when describing somebody. Also, emphasis should be placed on matters of politeness, of prejudice regarding certain features, and of 'inculcating' other features. Children can discuss issues from the perspective of personal perceptions on appearance and expression of sentiments, although the language of emotions is global in all cultures (Magos, 2019).

Sixth Step: Capitalizing on Class Daily Issues

The daily issues that may surface in children's relationships with educators may invalidate the messages of an educational program on human rights and diminish its value. Issues can make someone feel emotionally insecure; they obstruct communication and respect, while they render the educator incapable of being a democratic leader (Johansson & Emilson, 2016).

Consequently, it is necessary to develop a coordinated strategy for the confrontation of undesired behaviors in class. It is of vital importance that educators always remain open-minded during a debate or conflict. They should stress the view that there is a solution to every problem. They should help children to think about a problem bearing in mind that they will find the solution to it. Below, a more systematic approach to problem solving is presented:

- Identify and acknowledge the issue. Stop any physical or verbal confrontation and ask all of the children to have a debate on their behavior.
- Ask them to describe to you what happened. Ask of the children, who were involved in and the witnesses of the incident, to talk to you about the facts. Allow everyone to speak without interrupting them. A positive move of encouragement, such as touching the child's shoulder with your hand or embracing a child would help to dispel feelings of anger or guilt. It is most important, however, that you remain neutral in this phase.
- Tap into a range of solutions. Ask those, who have been directly involved, to tell you how the issue may be resolved. If children cannot find a solution, then, the educator proposes some possible solutions.
- Justify the solutions. Draw attention to the fact that there are many fair solutions. Encourage children to become aware of the physical and emotional consequences of these solutions and remind them of similar experiences of the past.
- Make a mutual agreement regarding the solution to the problem and the steps you will follow, to accomplish it.



- See what everyone has agreed on through to the end (Engdahl, 2015; Engdahl & Losso, 2019).

Seventh Step: Unswerving Confrontation of behaviors of discrimination

When a conflict occurs due to discrimination at someone's expense, it is not easy to find a solution. Children do not easily comprehend discrimination. In this case, the action the teacher will take is highly significant. It is recommended that the teacher should criticize racist behavior and make it clear that such conduct is unacceptable.

- He/She must clearly support the child who was offended, without passing criticism about the anger, fear or confusion the child might express.

He/She should confront the child with the racist behavior firmly, with strictness and a benevolent attitude at the same time.

- Educators should help children, who were victims of racist behavior, to understand that the negative treatment they faced because of their looks, their language or race, was due to racist attitudes. Such incidents, especially when they keep recurring, should also be discussed with the parents, the teachers association, and the local community.

The above method is implemented in all forms of discrimination. Wherever possible, ethnic diversity in class should be an informed, based on understanding decision, accepted, and even celebrated by all at every opportunity. We should remember that racism and sexism emerge in children at a very young age; thus, this method operates preemptively in terms of its social implications (Johansson & Emilson, 2016).

Also, it is necessary that the whole class should be encouraged to care for every disabled child. One could look up examples of activities whereby children can express their identity (Johansson, 2009).

Pedagogical Techniques for Education on Human Rights and Democracy

The suggested techniques show in which ways educators can set in motion children's empathy and "moral imagination", challenge biased views and integrate concepts such as human dignity and equality into their daily experiences relating to people, authority and a sense of responsibility. These techniques have been proved to be appropriate for education on human rights as they encourage critical thinking, cognitive and emotional education, and respect for diverse experiences and opinions, as well as the active participation of all those involved in the learning process (Johansson, 2009).



1) Group Reflection – Discussion

Group reflection requires the analysis of a problem and subsequently finding solutions to it. It encourages participation to a large extent, while it motivates participants to develop their creativity to the full. After presenting the problem, all ideas that may serve as possible solutions to it and that come up in the discussion are listed in a table or a written diagram. All answers are recorded. At this stage, no explanations are necessary, and no proposition is intercepted, criticized or rejected. The Kindergarten teacher subsequently classifies and analyzes the responses: some of them merge, some are fostered and some are discarded. In the end, the group makes suggestions and decisions pertaining to the problem/issue (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008).

2) Case Studies

Students work in small groups on actual or imaginary cases, to which they are called to apply human rights principles. Case studies must be based on plausible and realistic scenarios, focusing on two or three main topics. A case study can be presented when completed by the students; alternatively, the students can receive feedback seriatim about the case study as a developing situation (or a “developing case”), to which they must respond. This method encourages analysis, problem-solving and planning skills, as well as cooperation and building a team spirit. Case studies can be used for discussions or further investigation to begin (Johansson & Emilsson, 2016).

3) Experiential Teaching through Educational Drama Techniques

Dramatic Art Techniques in Education can help make concepts more concrete, by personifying abstract ideas and having them impact on mentalities, through combining emotional as well as mental responses towards human rights. Through role simulation, improvisation, debates etc., students can put themselves in someone else’s shoes; their perspective about the “other” is differentiated and empathy develops (Vitsou & Kamaretsou, 2020).

Epilogue

The teaching and learning of democratic values and human rights in Kindergarten constitutes a particularly important procedure, since it sets the ground for the creation of democratic, active and critically thinking future citizens. In order to raise little children’s awareness on matters of democracy and human rights, appropriate didactic approach methods should be used, to spur children’s interest and critical



thinking. The experiential approach is the most appropriate one, especially in regard with preschool age. Many incidents occurring in the school classroom may provide an opportunity for debate about human rights and democratic values. In addition, the Kindergarten Curriculum as well as the educational material need to serve as fundamental pillars in support of teaching the aforementioned topics. Finally, the Kindergarten teacher has a key role. On the one hand, he/she must be a 'vehicle' of the democratic values he/she wants to convey to the students. On the other hand, he/she has to tend to the creation of a democratic climate, where each child will feel security and trust in expressing him-/herself freely, in claiming his/her rights, and understanding his/her responsibility in the framework of a democratic school.

Bibliography

Birbili, M. (2007). Making the Case for a Conceptually Based Curriculum in Early Childhood Education. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 35(2), 141-147. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-006-0112-0>

Birbili, M., & Myrovali, A. (2019). Early childhood education and its contexts: The case of Greece [Special Issue]. *Education Inquiry*. DOI: 10.1080/20004508.2019.1687080

Engdahl, I. (2015). Early childhood education for sustainability: The OMEP world project. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 47, 347-366. DOI: 10.1007/s13158-015-0149-6

Engdahl, I. and Losso, M. (2019). "The Human Rights of Children and Young People from the Beginning: Early Childhood Care and Education for all", Human Rights for Children and Youth. *Sociological Studies of Children and Youth*, 24, 11-34. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1537-466120190000024002>

Gray, C. (2016). The Ying and the Yang of democracy in action: tackling children's rights in 2016, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 24(1), 1-4, DOI: 10.1080/09669760.2016.1140400

Johansson, E. (2009). "The Preschool Child of Today – The World-Citizen of Tomorrow?". *International Journal of Early Childhood* 41(2): 79-95. DOI: 10.1007/BF03168880

Johansson E. & Emilson, A. (2016). Conflicts and resistance: potentials for democracy learning in preschool, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 24(1), 19-35, DOI: 10.1080/09669760.2015.1133073

Katz, L. (2000). *Engaging children's minds: The project approach*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex



- Katz, L., & Chard, S. (2000). *Engaging children's minds: The project approach* (2nd ed.). Stamford, CT: Ablex
- Magos, K. (2019). Transforming the identity of the enemy in pre-school children. A case study in a Greek kindergarten. *International e-journal of educational studies (IEJES)*, 3 (5), 39-46
- Quennerstedt, A. (2016). Young children's enactments of human rights in early childhood education, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 24(1), 5-18, DOI: 10.1080/09669760.2015.1096238
- Quennerstedt, A. & Quennerstedt, M. (2014). "Researching Children's Rights in Education: Sociology of Childhood Encountering Educational Theory." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 35 (1): 115-132. DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2013.783962
- Samuelsson, P.I., & Carlsson, A.M. (2008). The playing learning child: Towards a pedagogy of early childhood. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 52(6), 623-641
- Sounoglou, M. & Michalopoulou, A. (2017). Early Childhood Education Curricula: Human Rights and Citizenship in Early Childhood Education. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 6 (2), 53-68
- Vitsou, M., Kamaretsou, A. (2020). Enhancing Peer Relationships in a Class of Refugee Children Through Drama in Education: An Action Research, *Creative Drama Education [Yaratici Drama Dergisi]* 15(2), 337-354. DOI: 10.21612/yader.2020.028

