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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to address the importance of authentic cultures education in the primary years. With the rapid globalisation that has taken place over the past century, there has emerged a great need for individuals to participate as active global citizens. It is within the school context that these skills, values and attitudes are fundamentally developed. This paper seeks to provide practical ways for educators to achieve this kind of relevant and effective intercultural education in the classroom.



Cultures education in the primary years: Promoting active global citizenship in a changing world

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The purpose of this article is to address the importance of authentic cultures education in the primary years. With the rapid globalisation that has taken place over the past century, there has emerged a great need for individuals to participate as active global citizens. It is within the school context that these skills, values and attitudes are fundamentally developed. This paper seeks to provide practical ways for educators to achieve this kind of relevant and effective intercultural education in the classroom.

Keywords: cultures education; global citizenship; perspectives; authentic learning; culture; primary education

Introduction

In today's rapidly changing world, where globalisation has led us to be so internationally interdependent, it has become more critical than ever for students in the primary years to be exposed to and come to understand cultures apart from their own. These experiences provide opportunities for students to form their own ideas and perspectives, as well as to shape the values and attitudes they hold. By gaining insights into the diverse cultures of the world, students not only come to recognise a whole new way of life from which they can learn, they also develop a stronger sense of their own identity as global citizens. In the primary years, engaging students in learning about international issues, experiences and perspectives is an essential part of them growing to be active global citizens who are engaged in the world around them and recognise their place and responsibility in it. For this kind of cultures education to be most effectively achieved, it must engage students in authentic and current interactions with other cultures. This article seeks to outline how this might practically be achieved in the primary classroom.

Global citizenship

The change of the last century has seen our world brought into a state of connectedness like never before. Intercultural interaction has become a commonplace experience with the rapid globalisation that has taken place. It is thus apparent that "being culturally responsive is one of the great imperatives of the century" (Reynolds, 2009, p.127). People of this age must recognise that they are no longer only citizens of their own country, but they are also global citizens – citizens of the world (Bovair



& Griffith, 2003). An active global citizen recognises their responsibility as a citizen of the world, welcomes diversity and seeks to improve or attain equity and sustainability wherever possible (Bovair & Griffith, 2003; Collins, 2009; Gordon 2009). As students take action to promote positive change in the world, they demonstrate active global citizenship (Zygmunt & Staley, 2006).

Cultures education

Education plays a key role in developing the young into active global citizens of our increasingly globalised world. The Delors report, *Learning: The Treasure Within* (1996), concluded that “humankind sees in education an indispensable asset in its attempt to attain the ideals of peace, freedom and justice ... education has a fundamental role to play in personal and social development ... to foster a deeper and more harmonious form of human development” (Delors, 1996, p.11). Children must learn to interact with a vast array of cultural groups, and to be responsive to them (Reynolds, 2009).

In the past, and even in some contexts today, cultures education in the primary years has consisted of only superficial research into countries and their way of life, reinforcing stereotypes and highlighting differences rather than fostering an appreciation of diversity that leads to active global citizenship (Bacon & Kischner, 2002). The ‘multicultural education’ approach outlined by Reynolds (2009) demonstrates this style of cultures education, in that it aims for descriptive overview of a society rather than interaction. The ‘intercultural education’ approach, on the other hand, is one that promotes interaction and dialogue between cultures. This approach is more suitable in light of the interdependent nature of the world today, where ongoing globalisation is rapidly increasing the frequency with which we interact with cultures other than our own. As Delors (1996) identified, ‘learning to live together’ is, in today’s world, the most important of the four outlined pillars of learning.

In applying this intercultural approach to cultures education, it is reasonable to further imply that learning experiences should be authentic and current in nature, stemming from the interactions taking place. Authentic learning engages students in content and contexts relevant to their needs, with a real and deep significance and impact even beyond the classroom (Callison & Lamb, 2004). Experiences of the real world are critical to authentic learning, stimulating children through meaningful, hands-on activities (Murphy, 2009). Students learn more effectively when they are engaged in learning about cultures in a way that is real and interesting. This can often prove a challenging task for educators in locating real-world resources to use for such learning experiences, however, once achieved, the benefits to students’ learning are immeasurable. Nearly all children in the primary years are classified in Piaget’s concrete operational stage of development and, therefore, do not yet possess the ability to think abstractly (Verenikina, Vialle & Lysaght, 2011). By engaging students in real-life learning experiences through interactions with people, they gain more effective insights into a culture through concrete examples. As Bacon and Kischner reflect, “Educators ... have found that they can greatly enhance the global curriculum when they look beyond textbooks and draw on rich, real-world resources to help develop students’ global perspectives” (2002, p.50). Through the sharing of real



personal experiences, students are not only thoroughly engaged in and excited about their learning, but they also develop a sense of responsibility and empathy toward others (Bovair & Griffith, 2003). It is interactions such as these that give students genuine insights into other cultures and guide them to a sense of global citizenship. When presented in this way, it becomes a stimulating, valuable and enriching experience for all those involved (Clark, 2000). There are a number of practical ways that learning experiences such as these can be achieved in the classroom.

Partner schools

Partner schools allow for students to create ongoing links and opportunities for sharing with others just like them around the world. Through these links, there is the possibility to establish direct contact, which “piques students’ curiosity and engages them in learning” (Bacon & Kischner, 2002, p.50). Students are personally engaged in an authentic context, where they have the opportunity to generate authentic questions and, from this, to initiate authentic tasks and activities that hold meaning and significance (Callison & Lamb, 2004). With the rapid development of technology, the possibilities for sharing of cultures via the internet are almost limitless (UNESCO, 2002). For example, cultural practices can be shared using internet video links for students to experience almost first-hand. Interactions between real people provide means for students to gain a unique insight into another culture by developing real relationships. These “strong overseas partnerships ... [where] strong relationships are developed” (Collins, 2009, p.52) are a critical influence in developing within the individual a sense of global citizenship. It is important that these school partnerships are not merely based on the desire of a Western school to help in the development of an underprivileged one, but rather that the connection is based on a mutual sharing experience, where the schools work collaboratively to share stories and impart knowledge (Bovair & Griffith, 2003). Through these extended relationships across cultures students gain not only a snapshot of the people, but a more-rounded overview of a way of life.

Personal stories

The diversity of our society today provides added opportunities for interactions with people who have experienced other cultures firsthand. Teachers may choose to invite visitors from other cultural backgrounds, or even returned travellers, to share their stories, and provide students with personal experiences and perspectives (Bacon & Kischner, 2002; UNESCO, 2002). There may even be the opportunity to have students from the class share about their cultural background, creating an even more-effective learning experience through a deeper shared relationship (Reynolds, 2009). The most valuable aspect of this learning experience is that students are learning about real people, and thus begin to recognise the reality of our diverse and ever-changing world, in which they hold a position of responsibility. Authentic classroom experiences are characterised by lifelong learning such as this (Callison & Lamb, 2004).



Research into current affairs

Rather than simply learning from textbooks, valuable insights can be gained into a culture by research into its current affairs. Linkages can also be made with organisations that interact more directly with a cultural group, such as global aid or development organisations. By participating in thorough research into current issues pertaining to specific cultural groups, students can form their own perspectives as they compile relevant information. Teachers must be proactive, however, in equipping their students with critical literacy skills, particularly when dealing with resources from the global media (Carneiro & Draxler, 2008). This kind of student-centred information inquiry is a fundamental component of authentic learning experiences (Callison & Lamb, 2004).

The way ahead

Cultures education needs to be done using a holistic approach, where authentic learning about other cultures is integrated throughout the whole curriculum (Reynolds & Lovat, 2002, cited in Reynolds, 2009). Indeed, cultures education is not achieved through stand-alone events or activities, it must be almost seamlessly integrated into the curriculum, pedagogy, values and attitudes of the classroom (Collins, 2009). Learning about other cultures cannot be the sole responsibility of the teacher, but requires the collective responsibility of an entire community to cultivate in our youth a sense of global citizenry (Gordon, 2009). It is a most valuable asset for our future to prepare the young for active global citizenship.

Conclusion

With the world now more connected than ever, it is essential that students in the primary years be fully equipped to live as active global citizens. It is through authentic learning experiences in cultures education that this can be achieved. Students must be engaged in real, and thus significant and meaningful, interactions with people from around the world, allowing them to experience concrete notions of culture and develop their own perspectives, as well as, inevitably, their own values and attitudes. From such learning, students will gain not only a thorough knowledge of the many diverse people and perspectives of the world around them, but they will also gain a sense of their place and responsibility within it.

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