EDU WORLD 2018
The 8ᵗʰ International Conference

THE PROJECT-BASED LEARNING – AN OPPORTUNITY TO CHANGE PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

Alina Turculeț (a)*
*Corresponding author

(a) *Transilvania* University of Brașov, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Nicolae Bălcescu 56, 500019, Brașov, Romania, alina.turculet@unitbv.ro

Abstract

The project-based learning is common in postmodern education. Therefore is a concept frequently promoted in teachers' interactions at any level of school activities. The project-based learning was introduced in Romanian national curriculum in 2012. The benefits for children are well known: project-based learning meets their interests, stimulates their curiosity, shapes their relationships, builds their knowledge, and matches all their stylistic profiles. Nevertheless, project-based learning sets the skills for life-deep learning. The educated parents, who have had professional contacts with management models from foreign countries, have already understood the inefficiency of academic skills in the absence of other abilities. The project-based learning could transform Romanian school into a friendly environment that meets parents' interests too. The entire primary education is organized according to the principles of postmodern education. Do primary school teachers use project method? How do primary school teachers use projects in their teaching strategies? Do Romanian primary school teachers consider there is a need of cultural adaptation for project method? In order to answer to these questions we have analysed the data collected in a questionnaire-based inquiry addressed to primary school teachers from Brașov. Our empirical study shows the conditions in which the project method is used in primary education.

Keywords: Project-based learning, life-deep learning, primary education.

1. Introduction

Starting with 2012, primary school education in Romania aims at developing students' competences. The official curriculum requires the adaptation of the learning contents to the needs of students in contemporary society. The needs of the students include stimulating curiosity, taking into account their previous acquisition as a foundation for their future learning, relating theory to practice and real life, respecting the community and its resources, transforming school activity into an interactive process. In these terms, project method becomes most appropriate in primary school education.

If learning is context-dependent, then educational practices need to be adapted to the context. The pragmatic implementation of the curriculum and the correct positioning in relation to student needs endows schools with teachers who have impact on their students' learning. Some authors mention among the indicators of excellence in education the transformation of schools and classrooms in safety environments where teachers and students may explore the knowledge, making learning opportunities from ordinary mistakes (Hattie, 2014). There are differences among teachers, as well as there are differences in the impact the same teacher has on different students (Potolea, 1989; Hattie, 2014). Teaching strategies interact with student learning strategies and might be adjusted through feedback in order to achieve educational goals. The adjustment of educational practices is the result of the creative expression of the teacher's personality (Iucu, 2006). Thus, the educational practices have to be adjusted to the local context and the project method to the specificity the community.

2. Problem Statement

The analysis of the official curriculum for primary education in Romania reveals the following issues:

- requires adaptation of the didactic strategy to the age specificity of students;
- emphasizes the importance of stimulating curiosity and interest of all children;
- insist on cooperation and collaboration in the educational process;
- emphasizes the interdependence of all forms of education in the community.

In primary education, the design of the didactic activity is carried out on thematic projects. The curriculum introduced starting with 2012 strongly recommends engaging in partnership activities with members of the community through the development of projects. The curriculum for civic education, studied in the 3rd and 4th grades proposes explicitly the use of project method to develop the active-participatory attitudes and civic spirit. There are many acceptations for the same word: *project*. Therefore, there is a need of clarification regarding the use of project method in primary school education.

The project-based learning is one of the key-element for the endowment of the children with the most important abilities for the 21st century: the emotional and relational abilities (Goleman, 2018). Frequently used as socio-emotional competences, these abilities will lead not only to the pleasure for learning in a friendly environment, but to lifelong learning and life-deep learning. In a world characterized by uncertainty and superficiality, quality learning, deep learning is at the discretion of those who are curious, interested, connected to real life, and interconnected to their fellows. In these terms, the interest for the integration of the project method in teaching and learning strategies is justified.

3. Research Questions

Due to the recommendation in the official curriculum to encourage the implication of students in projects suitable for their age, our study does not investigate whether the projects are used or not, but how the project method is assembled into the educational strategy.

3.1. Research questions

The study aimed at investigating how primary school teachers understand project-based learning sets the following research question:

- How do primary school teachers use projects in their teaching strategies?
- Do Romanian primary school teachers consider there is a need of cultural adaptation for project method?

3.2. Objectives

In order to answer the research questions we set the following objectives:

- To identify in which disciplines primary school teachers use project method.
- To verify the opportunity of using project method in primary school education.
- To identify the perception of primary school teachers regarding the necessity of a cultural adaptation of project method.

4. Purpose of the Study

The study aims to identify how teachers for primary education use the project-based learning. Because the target population belongs to a multicultural environment, the study also aims to investigate the primary school teachers' perception about cultural adaptation of project method.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Participants

The target population of the study consist in 53 primary school teachers from Brașov, female only. The age of the participants is between 22 and 63 (M=43.66; SD=11.41). The primary school teachers are interested in their professional development: 5 declare they are at the debut of their professional activity, 9 declare they have the right to practice according to the Romanian legislation, 8 have graduated the exams for the second degree, and 31 have graduated the evaluation for first degree, the highest position in teachers' hierarchy.
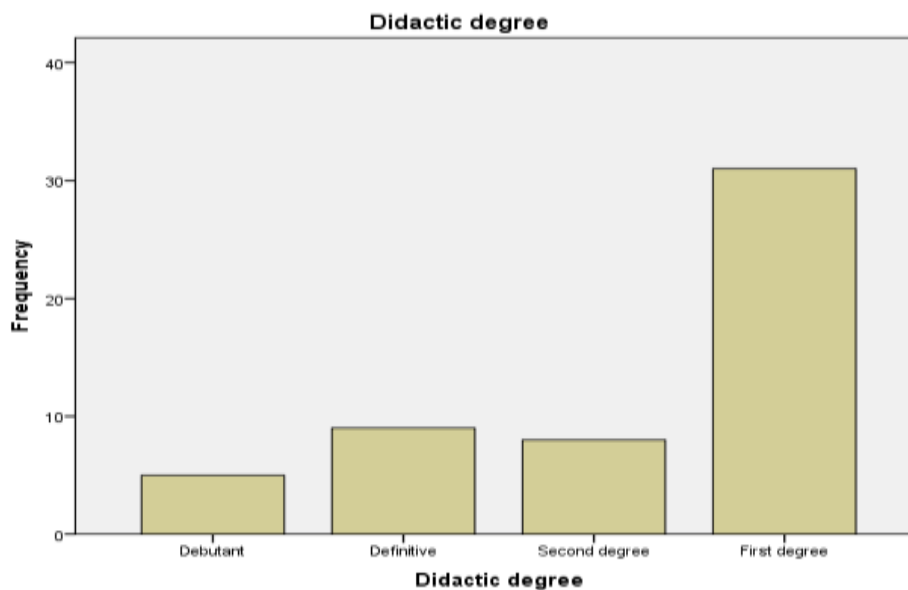
Figure 01. The frequencies of the didactic degrees of primary school teachers

5.2. Measures

To collect the data needed in this research, we designed a self-administered questionnaire with multiple or short responses. The questionnaire requires factual data (age, gender, the residence environment, the didactic degree), and the opinion of the respondents about: the utility of project method in primary school education, the necessity of a cultural adaptation of project method, advantages and limits of project method.

5.3. Procedure

The questionnaire-based inquiry was conducted between July and September 2018. The participation in the investigation was voluntary, each participant giving its prior consent.

6. Findings

The project method is very popular among primary school teacher of Braşov. They all declare they use this teaching method in their current activities. The most suitable subject areas for organizing the school activity in projects are as follows: civic education, history, geography, science. The examples indicated at the request to describe the last project developed are included in the curriculum. Usually, the projects gather two or more educational disciplines, according to the principles of integrated learning. The disciplines that accumulate the highest number of hours in the weekly schedule are excluded, for the most part (Romanian language and literature and mathematics). The evaluation pressure and the scientific content are shown as important factors in choosing a teaching strategy. Therefore, the respondents declare they choose flexible disciplines to design project based teaching strategy.

6.1. Findings regarding the opportunity of using project method in primary school education

The majority of the respondents recognizes the utility of project method in primary school education: 79.2% consider this method appropriate and 20,8% inappropriate. The primary school teachers highlight

among the advantages of project-based learning cooperation, negotiation, assertive communication, team-work, decision-making, self-regulated learning. Among the limits of it, they enumerate the lack of resources, including time and financial support, the integration of children with special educational needs, providing quality education for less-endowed children. Thus, they motivate their preference to use projects for subject areas others than Romanian language and literature and mathematics.

6.2. Findings regarding the necessity of a cultural adaptation of the project method

At the request to indicate if there is a need for cultural adaptation of project method, 90.6% of the respondents consider that the cultural adaptation is needed (M=0.91; SD=0.29).
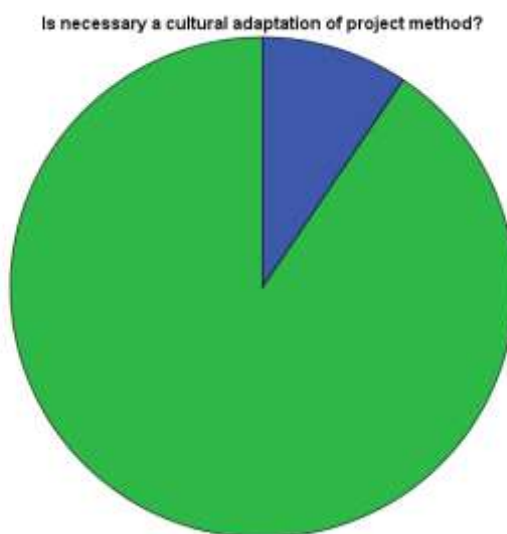
Figure 02. The percentage of teachers who consider the cultural adaptation necessary

Concerning the cultural adaptation of the method, the respondents divided the meaning of *culture* in Romanian culture and community culture. Therefore, we should analyse this issue at two different levels.

7. Conclusion

The educational system in Romania is being matched with the international trends in education. The European recommendations are respected and the official curriculum is organized according to the frame of postmodern education. This implies new approaches to classroom and educational relationships (Ulrich, 2007). The attempts of Romanian society to align with the international course are well known (Pop, 1999). The teachers try to adapt their professional practice to 21st century requirements. In these conditions, they introduce in their current strategies teaching methods developed in Western countries. Projects are one of them. When initiators understand that it is important what the student learns, the focus is correct: on learning through projects. Well-conducted projects facilitate students' deep-learning connecting school to real life. Therefore, the students find the essence of learning and the pleasure to learn (Ulrich, 2016).

The researchers have highlighted the importance of human interactions for brain development and the importance of early-developed socio-emotional abilities for future learning or professional success (Brazelton & Sparrow, 2006). The educational strategies are more effective when formal and non-formal

education are mixed, producing efficient thinking skills (Cianciolo & Sternberg, 2012). Specialists in child development add to the essential needs of all children the need for stable and supportive communities and cultural continuity (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2013). The community becomes a learning platform, filled with opportunities for every curios member (Ulrich, 2016). Thus, the learning community (Ciolan, 2008) empower every member with competences beyond the academic skills that will determine the intelligent behaviour of the responsible adult.

From this perspective, the project-based learning appears to be the most appropriate educational strategy. Learning trough projects in primary school education changes the pattern to evaluate students and educational communities. Then, projects change the appearance of the Romanian school into a friendly environment, attached to the philosophy the 21st century and preparing the students beyond the rigid frame of reading and writing.

Regarding the necessity of a cultural adaptation of the project method, this appears legitimate in the condition of recognizing cultural dimensions and differences. According to some studies, the characteristics of the culture strongly influences the personality of the individuals (Hofstede, 2014). The conclusions of the previous studies are useful for the explanation of people's behaviours. The interactional patterns between teachers and students or between students, in Romania, could be explained by a brief analysis of the features of the Romanian culture. These are: high score at power distance (DIP=90), collectivist culture (IDV=30), feminine culture (MAS=42), high uncertainty avoidance (EVI=90), medium score at long term orientation (OTL=52), low score at permissiveness – austerity (PEA=20) (Hofstede, 2014). The score at power distance explains the order of authority and the dependence on hierarchical superior decision. The collectivist orientation requires the adaptation to the social group, loyalty being the most important attribute of the members. The feminine orientation of the Romanian culture determines, in school activity, the evaluation of teachers through their friendly attitude and of students through their social adaptation, not by academic results. The score at uncertainty avoidance could explain the lack of students' initiative in educational communication. The score obtained at the last cultural dimension, permissiveness – austerity, could explain the lack of flexibility or interest for the well-being of the children or for their pleasure to learn. Many factors influence human behaviour. The cultural frame could explain the current mind-set of the Romanians and predict improvement measures to build a proper status of teachers. In the context of the globalization and of the increasing role of communities, the construction of the professional identity of teachers is changing. The challenges of the postmodern society requires a new approach to national identity (Păun, 2017). In an Europe of national identities, Romanians have to affirm their own model of civilization (Pop, 2018). One of the psychological attributes of the Romanians which have to be improved is low trust in other people, which determins a lack of cooperation (David, 2015). Therefore, a cultural adaptation of teaching and learning strategies based on cooperation should be taken into account

References

Brazelton, T.B & Sparrow, J.D. (2006). *Touchpoints. From 0 to 3. Your Child's Emotional and and Behavioral Development.* Cambridge: Da Capo Press
Brazelton, T.B & Greenspan, S.I. (2013). *Nevoile esenţiale ale copiilor. [The essential needs of children].* București: Editura Trei.
Cianciolo, A.T. & Sternberg R.J. (2012). *Inteligenţa. Scurt istoric. [Intelligence. A brief history].* București: Editura Trei.

Ciolan, L. (2008). *Învăţarea integrată. Fundamente pentru un curriculum transdisciplinar. [Integrated learning. Foundations for a transdisciplinary curriculum].* Iași: Polirom

David, D. (2015). *Psihologia poporului roman. Profilul psihologic al românilor într-o monografie cognitiv-experimentală. [The psychology of the Romanian people. The psychological profile of the Romanians in a cognitive-experimental monography].* Iași: Polirom

Goleman, D. (2018). *Inteligenţa emoţională. [Emotional intelligence].* București: Curtea Veche

Hattie, J. (2014). *Învăţarea vizibilă. Ghid pentru profesori. [Visible learning. Guide for teachers].* București: Editura Trei

Hofstede, G. (2014). *Culturi şi organizaţii. Softul mental. Cooperarea interculturală şi importanţa ei pentru supravieţuire. [Cultures and organizations. The mental software. Intercultural cooperation and its importance for survival].* București: Humanitas

Iucu, R. (2006). *Managementul clasei de elevi. Aplicaţii pentru gestionarea situaţiilor de criză. [Classroom management. Aplications for managing crises].* Iași: Polirom

Păun, E. (2017). *Pedagogie. Provocări şi dileme privind şcoala şi profesia didactică. [Pedagogy. Challenges and dilemmas about school and the teaching profession].* Iași: Polirom

Pop, I.A. (1999). *Romanians and Romania: A Brief History.* New York: Columbia University Press

Pop, I.A. (2018). *Interviu despre educaţia din România cu noul preşedinte al Academiei, Ioan Aurel Pop. (interviu realizat de Florin Saiu pentru Evenimentul zilei din 6 aprilie 2018). [Interview about the Romanian education with the new president of the Romanian Academy realized by Florin Saiu for The Event of the Day, April 6th, 2018].* Available at https://foaienationala.ro/interviu-despre-educatia-din-romania-cu-noul-presedinte-al-academiei ioan-aurel-pop.html

Potolea, D. (1989). *De la stiluri la strategii, o abordare empirică a comportamentului didactic.* în Jinga, I & Vlăsceanu, L. (1989). *Structuri, strategii şi performanţe în învăţământ. [From styles to strategies, an empirical approach to teaching behaviour în* Jinga, I & Vlăsceanu, L. (1989). *Structures, strategies and performances in education].* București: Editura Aademiei

Ulrich, C. (2007). *Postmodernism şi educaţie. [Postmodernism and education].* București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică

Ulrich, C. (2016). *Învăţarea prin proiecte. Ghid pentru profesori. [Learning through projects. Guide for teachers].* Iași: Polirom