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TEACHING STRATEGIES OF SOCIAL COMPETENCES IN POSTMODERN SCHOOL

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Abstract

This article focuses on the analysis of social education, redesigned from the constructivist paradigm, according to the needs of the generation of digital natives and to the new social ethic of the 21st century. How could social competences be achieved in school? What kind of strategies, methods, and teacher-student relationships should be used to develop a responsible digital citizenship? A possible answer would be an interactive approach to transformative learning based on authentic experiences including students' digital competences. Our study aims to identify the impact of teaching strategies on developing students' social competences. The experimental research was conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2017-2018. The target population consisted in students enrolled in the final year at the Faculty of Psychology an Educational Sciences. A questionnaire regarding students' perceptions on their own social competences was applied. The future preschool and primary school teachers chose project-based learning as the most appropriate method to teach social sciences. Our findings highlight that using constructivist teaching strategies, like authentic learning, project-based learning, role-play, has a strong impact on developing students social competences. Our results are in line with previous studies and show that well conducted interactive methods are welcome in higher education.

Keywords: Project-based learning, social competences, postmodern school.

1. Introduction

1.1. Social education in a digitalized society

This study focuses on the role of project method in social education field as a postmodern strategy for learning and training social competences addressed to students who are *"digi-generation"* (Veen, & Vrakking, 2011). The challenge for education would be to train postmodern students with modern teachers (Finkielkraut, 2015) in a changing environment. The specialists in the field of education (Siebert, 2001; Mezirow, 2014; Hattie, 2014; Robinson, 2015; Senge, 2016; Stolovitch & Keeps, 2017) underline the necessity of redefining the place and the role of school in the individuals' lives and in society. The evolution of the society in the last decades has changed human relations. The impact of the technology has transformed entire generations and has divided the world population in two categories: digital natives and digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001). The digitalization has reshaped identity and has given a different understanding of citizenship (Ohler, 2010). In these circumstances, the need for social education becomes relevant because we need social competences for personal and social development.

The school as social laboratory, the teachers as promoters of new social values, the strategies of project-based learning, and experiential learning are tools for a new social ethic. An international study on civic education in Europe highlighted that all countries with a citizenship curriculum aim to develop social competences such as: effective and constructive interaction with others, prosocial behaviour, democratic action and critical thinking (European Commission, 2017). In this context, the educational landscape in Romania has been changing during the last years according to the international trends and the European recommendations. Starting with 2012, the official curriculum includes new disciplines regarding the social competence and its formation. In primary school education, Personal Development (since 2012) and Civic Education (since 2015) are involved in developing the relational abilities of pupils and in setting the desirable social interaction of future responsible citizens. In secondary education, Social Education represents the curricular frame for introducing students in Critical Thinking and Children Rights, Intercultural Education, Education for a Democratic Citizenship or Entrepreneurial Education (since 2017). The methodological suggestions of all syllabi recommend the use of project method in ordinary school activities. Therefore, it seems (as our research results) that the method of projects is not only an effective method of forming social competences, but also responds to the increasingly training needs of today's students.

1.2. Teaching social competences in postmodern school

The social competences, which are important tools for social adaptation, integration and personal development, are nowadays more important. We can make an easy experiment: we can observe during a day, how many social competences we use. We will find that we use a lot of social competences or social skills and values all day long: from daily greetings to assertive communication skills, cooperation, empathy, checking emails or chatting on the phone. We can observe that today the social competences are diversifying and becoming more complex resembling the complexity of society demands. Therefore, social competences must be redefined according to digitized, globalized and dynamic society. This is necessary for two reasons: the need to respect the values of education and to practice these values in social competences. The first reason is the need to return to the principles and values of human education. Into a

complex and diversified world, we need authentic values. The UNESCO study of 2015 clearly highlights the idea of redefining education from the perspective of a humanistic approach:*"The purpose of education must therefore be revisited in light of a renewed vision of sustainable human and social development that is both equitable and viable."* (, p.31). The second reason is that social competences must be formed through *"social exercises"* and school is the best environment for this kind of exercise. For this, constructivist paradigm that promotes student centred learning, learning in groups, learning in an emotionally positive environment, is a key to develop social competences in a postmodern manner. In constructivism, learning means to create together with colleagues and teachers the meaning of new concepts. The curriculum is negotiated by students and their teacher. Siebert (2001) argues that competences must be formed in a real context, through the contact with experiences, and students must be taught in a real context through exploration. Therefore, the project method is useful. Even it is not a new method (the project method was introduced by Kilpatrick in 1918), today the project method becomes a learning strategy. The evolution of project method is analysed by Ulrich (2016) who underlines the formative impact of this learning strategy. Why is the project so used? Firstly, the project method promotes an authentic learning, based on experience, which transforms the students' mind-set. Transformative learning assumes *"the process by which we transform problematic reference frameworks (mentalities, mental habits, perspectives on meanings) - sets of assumptions and expectations - to make them more comprehensive, lighter, more reflexive and more capable of affective change"* (Mezirow, 2014, p.168). The students, who are involved into a project, learn to cooperate, to accept different points of view, to feel and understand a human being. They develop not only social competences, but also new mental structures and human relations. That is why the experiential learning meets the requirements of competence-based curriculum and *"standing comfortably in postmodernism, gains an increasingly privileged place as a method of cultivating desire and forming an identity"* (Usher, 2014, p. 310). Secondly, the project corresponds much better to the student's psychological profile in the net generation. Students involved in a group project can resolve problems into a creative way on networking, they can collaborate and learn from each other and they feel comfortable. They learn in a positive way.

2. Problem Statement

In recent years, educational research highlighted the benefits of social interactions not only for the well-being of the individuals, but for their learning outcomes (Goleman, 2009; Cozolino 2017; Walker 2018). In the same time, the evolution of the society in the 21st century, as an effect of globalization and digitalization, significantly modifies interacting patterns between individuals both in daily life and in the educational environment. Promoting responsible behaviours in a world where values are less obvious has its importance. The learning offer from the academic environment for the social education subject aria significantly influences the way the future preschool and primary school teachers will organize the learning situations for their own students. It becomes more important in a system searching for its new models and examples. Therefore, investigating the impact of using recognized methods, such as the project method, is legitimate.

3.   Research Questions

Given the opportunity to teach about social education according to a newly introduced curriculum, in the digital age, we have structured our research on the following research questions and objectives:

3.1. Research questions

The questions that guided our research were:

- How could social competences be achieved in school?
- What kind of strategies, methods, and teacher-student relationships should be used to develop a responsible digital citizenship?

3.2. Objectives

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

- To identify the initial level of students regarding social competences;
- To implement the formative program based on interactive teaching-learning-evaluation strategies;
- To identify the impact of teaching strategies on developing students' social competences.

4.   Purpose of the Study

The present research aims to investigate the impact of postmodern teaching strategies on developing students' social competences. At the beginning, we explored the students' perception on the social values and on their own social competences. We implemented a constructivist program based on project-based learning and we evaluated students' acquisitions by the projects they realized working in teams and respecting the pre-established criteria.

5.   Research Methods

According to the research objectives, we selected the research methods appropriate to our design: questionnaire based inquiry and a quasi-experimental situation.

5.1. Participants

The target population consisted in the students enrolled in the third year of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, specialization Pedagogy of Preschool and School Education, namely 78 students, female (74) and male (4).

5.2. Measures

We used a self-administered questionnaire with short answers based on social values, social behaviours, and appropriate methods to teach social education. We realized a qualitative analysis of students' answers before and after the constructivist program designed on project based learning.

5.3. Procedure

The research was carried out during the second semester of the academic year 2017-2018. After collecting the data about students' expectations from the course and seminar, we have customized the learning situations according to the particularities of the student group. At the end of our intervention, we reapplied the evaluation procedure in order to test the differences in students' responses. Of the 78 students enrolled, only 30 actually completed the questionnaire in initial evaluation procedure and 39 in the final. With some minor exceptions, the majority of the students have participated in more than half of the course and seminar activities.

6. Findings

The qualitative analysis on students' responses in the initial evaluation indicates a medium level of their acquisitions regarding the social values. The young people consider important values in contemporary society as follows: *education, respect, humanity, dignity, freedom of speech, gender equality, anticorruption, private property, equality of chances, human rights, loyalty, morality, faith, truth, freedom, tolerance, empathy, understanding, good sense, sincerity, righteousness, good, self-esteem, kindness, correctness, friendship, responsibility, perseverance, ambition, courage, integrity, altruism, desire to work.* We evaluated students' responses and recorded 4 unsatisfactory responses, 10 satisfactory responses and 16 very good responses (N=30; M=2,40; SD=0,72) (figure 01).
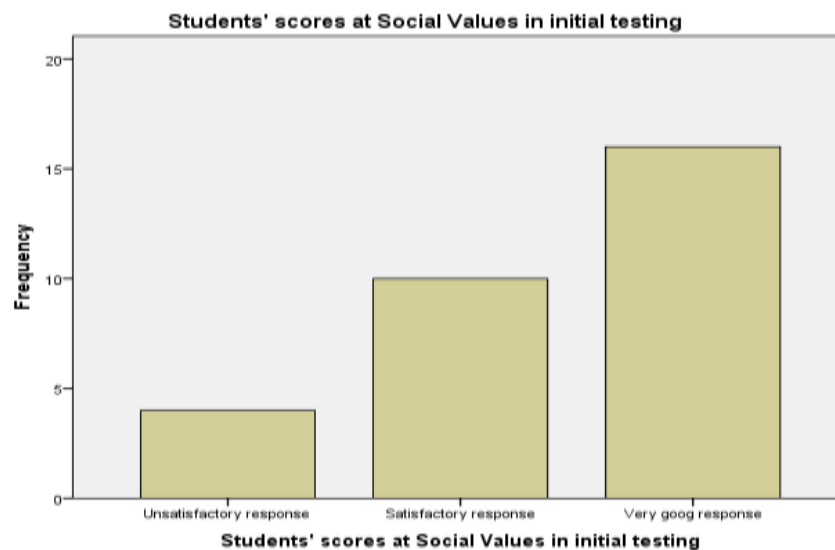

Figure 01.   Students' scores at *Social Values* in initial testing

In the final evaluation, the level of students' acquisition regarding the social values has been improved: 2 unsatisfactory responses, 10 satisfactory responses, and 27 very good responses (N=39; M=2,64; SD=0,58) (figure 02). The students indicated as important values in the contemporary society: *respect, justice, dignity, honesty, sincerity, truth, humanity, empathy, equality, good sense, correctness, faith, morality, kindness, good, freedom of speech, responsibility, altruism.*
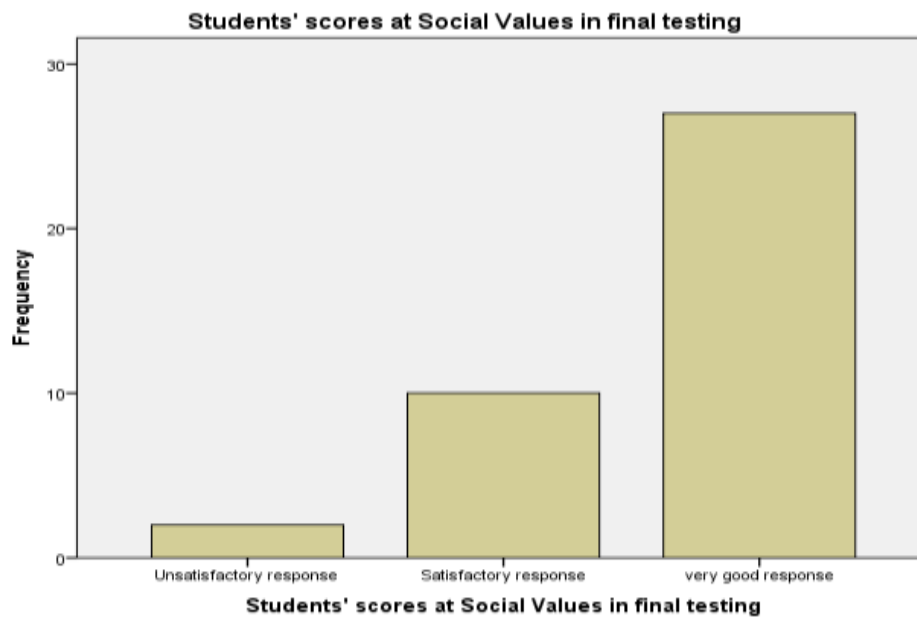
Figure 02.   Students' scores at *Social Values* in final testing

Statistical analysis showed there are differences without statistical significance (t=-1,98; p=0,57).

6.1. Findings regarding students' social competences

At the request to indicate the competence they perceived like being promoted during the course, 38,5% among students choose social competences, 35,9% indicated other competences, and 25,6 failed to complete the answer (figure 03). The most frequent responses were related to cooperation, collaboration, and teamwork. One of the students added to social competences the professional competence *"to correctly and completely realize an educational project. This seems to me to be extremely important for our future work"*. In our final session, all the present students declared that the way the course was conducted helped them to discover new abilities of their own and of their colleagues. We should take into account that the target population of the study consisted in students enrolled in the final year. They actually had plenty of time to get to know each other. They were accustomed to teamwork. They made their teams according to well-defined criteria, such as working style. Nevertheless, besides the scientific contents, and the methodical abilities of designing an educational project, our students have improved their relational competences not only in accomplishing work tasks, but in their everyday interactions also.
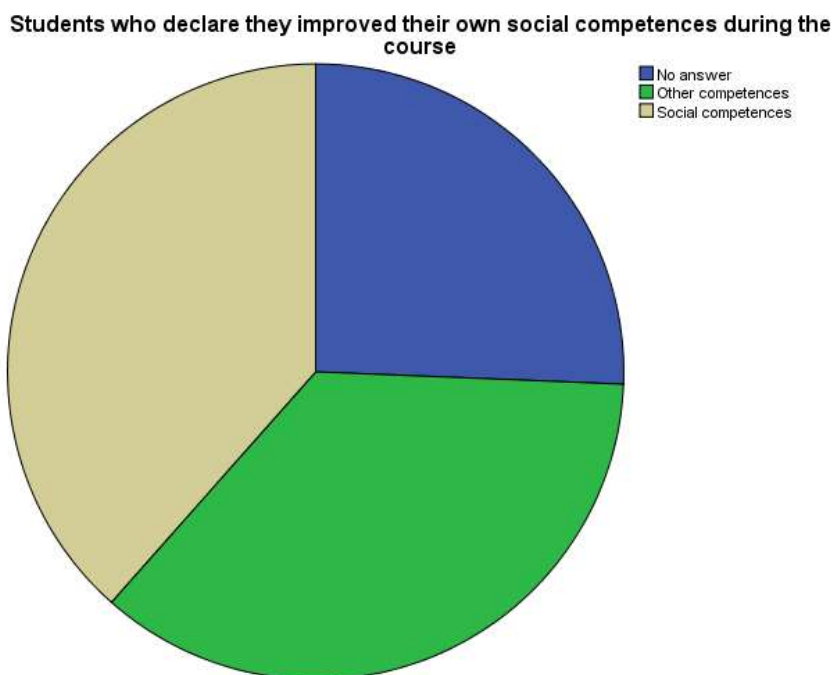
Figure 03.   Students who declared they improved their own social competences during the course

6.2. Findings regarding the impact of teaching strategies on developing students' social and professional competences

In order to implement the formative program, we designed a strategy, which included interactive methods like *RAFT*, *Mosaic method or expert technique*, peer teaching and teaching in pairs, *Find someone who knows*, outdoor activities. We invited a resource teacher, a primary school teacher involved in many international projects, who shared to the student her knowledge about using technology in the 21st century.

We have chosen as an indicator of the success of the activity the students' perception on most appropriate methods to teach *Social Education*.

Table 01. Students' preference for teaching methods in *Social Education*

Traditional Methods	Modern Methods	Interactive Methods, including Projects	Traditional Methods	Modern Methods	Interactive Methods, including Projects
Initial testing			Final testing		
22	16	1	12	15	12

Before the intervention, only one of the students indicated the project method as being useful for teaching *Social Education*. At the end of the programme, 12 students considered project method the best way to teach *Social Education* (table 01). The analysis of students' responses shows that the number of those choosing modern methods is approximately the same: 16 in initial testing, 15 in final testing. The number of the students who choose traditional teaching methods like *conversation*, *exercise*, and *demonstration* was higher before the constructivist programme. At the beginning, 22 students indicated only traditional teaching methods. At the end, 12 students noted traditional methods. Regarding the

interactive teaching methods, including projects, before the formative programme based on project-based learning, only 1 student named the project method as being appropriate to teach *Social Education*. After the formative intervention, 12 students choose project method for teaching *Social Education* (figure 04). The results have to be interpreted in the larger context of preschool and primary school education specificity. Due to the age and the psychological particularities of pupils enrolled, certain teaching strategies have be used in order to achieve the educational objectives. Direct strategies are more appropriate for preschool and primary school pupils. The directivity of teachers is higher; children have to follow the instructions. Therefore, traditional methods are frequently indicated and used in daily school activities.
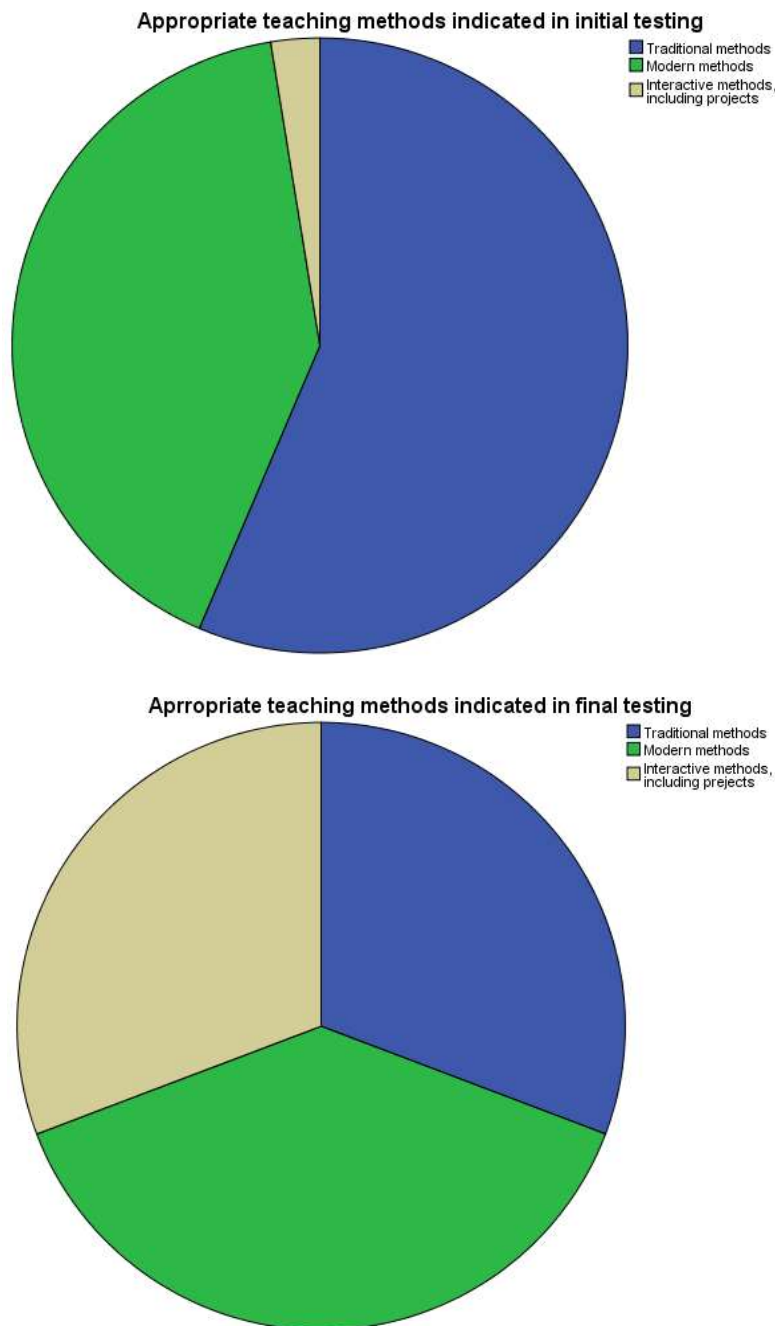

Figure 04. Appropriate methods chosen by students for teaching *Social Education*

7. Conclusion

One of the main conclusions to be drawn is that using the project-based learning strategy is a solution for postmodern school and digital students. Nevertheless, in order to get the desired effects, a project-based learning strategy has to meet several conditions: to be design for digital native students, to be organized not only in formal context (in classroom), to promote cooperation, responsibility and other social values. The teacher have to become a learning moderator. The evaluation is also rethought in line with the project' learning activities. Another conclusions, refers to teachers who have to assume the role of promoters of social values, from design and implementation to project evaluation. In these conditions, teachers are social models for their students. A very important model analysed from different perspectives: a human perspective, when the individual is a personal projection of values, beliefs and attitudes, and a professional perspective, when the teacher is a professional model of pedagogical conduct.

The results enhance the importance of teaching *Social Education* by interactive methods and by establishing a real partnership between teachers and students. The project method implemented according to a correct or relevant model (Ulrich, 2016) empower students to develop a large array of acquisitions: scientific knowledge, methodological techniques, and digital skills, emotional and social abilities. Well-conducted projects produce all the benefits of project-based learning: stimulating curiosity, meeting students' interests, motivating, generating the pleasure to learn and the passion for learning, developing sustainable acquisitions. Among the limits of using project method in school activity, the responses indicated most often the difficulty to manage the schedule and financial resources. However, the benefits for developing social competences recommends the project-based learning in all learning environment, starting with preschool education, primary school education, secondary education, and ending with universities.

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