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Improving teaching and learning activities in subjects from “Human and society” curricular area at secondary school level. Case study for a school in Romania

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Abstract. The present article is an analysis of some efficient didactic strategies for the teaching-learning activities in subjects from “Human and Society” curriculum area at Secondary school and a presentation of a quasi-experimental psychological-pedagogical research that had the objective to measure the effects over students’ performances in subjects from “Human and Society” curricular area following the participation of teaching staff training programs and international mobility.

Keywords. leaching, learning, active strategies, secondary school

1. Introduction. Theoretical highlights in “Human and society” curriculum area at secondary school

Oprea L.C. (2006) describes interactive didactic strategy as “being the result of an active collaborative participation, carried out by the teacher together with the students so that they can express their own interests in intellectual knowledge...” (Oprea, C.L., 2006, p. 26). Group strategies have an active-participative-interactive character, because they take place through the collaboration of students organized in micro-groups or work teams. The active-participative character of the group activity is useful and beneficial to any teaching endeavor, if the strategy used is carried out correctly by the teacher.

Vicol M.I. (2013) states that “interactive didactic strategies are based on cooperative learning”, strategies with which students can work together in a relationship of collaboration and mutual support (Vicol, M.I., 2013, p. 12). The group offers reciprocity in regard of cognitive, affective and social influence developed by interactive didactic strategies. There are communication relationships, homogenization, participation through information exchange, relationships that depend on the personal characteristics of the group members, situational factors, inter- and intragroup relationships.

In the article "A new vision on didactic strategies", Mihăilă M.M. and Petrovschi N. claim that "interactivity in the classroom (face-to-face) refers both to the promotion of inter- and intragroup relations, as well as between teacher and student. Regarding distance education, the interactivity is constituted by a software that responds in a differentiated way to the reactions of the learner" (Mihăilă, M.M., Petrovschi, N., 2020, p.57). The authors found, from the

experience accumulated during the four months, in which we had to design strategies for conducting online lessons, that actively participatory activities are more effective in the natural classroom than in the virtual one. Physical social interaction does not exist in the virtual environment, which makes the student, but also the teacher, feel the physical absence of the interlocutor but also a "sadness" due to the lack of communication (face-to-face), the rules of the virtual class differ from those of the natural class.

In "Group Interactive Methods" work, Breben S., Gongea E., Ruiu G., Fulga M., (2007) make a classification of interactive group strategies from the perspective of the needs of modern education, the presented methods representing "a beginning, a change, a novelty"(Breben S., Gongea E., Ruiu G., Fulga M., 2007, p. 10): "teaching-learning methods", "fixation, reinforcement and evaluation methods", "creativity methods", "problem solving methods", "group research methods".

2. Teaching-learning strategies for subjects in the Human and Society curriculum area. Cooperative learning – Working in groups

In "Treaty of modern didactics" work Ionescu M. and Bocoş M. (2017) define and describe this method as a component of collaborative learning but also as a modern variant of group work and emphasize the following elements: the difficulty and responsibility of the tasks are equally and equitably distributed among the group members, the aim is to develop the spirit of cooperation, team work, helping each other.

The authors state that the collective activity aims at "developing interpersonal communication skills, interactions, competences and social behaviors of students (Ionescu, M., Bocoş, M., 2017, p. 257). Thus, group members are aware of the fact that they belong to a larger group, contributing to the achievement of its tasks and that solving tasks is done through collaboration, being more difficult to solve the task individually.

The application and practice of cooperative learning is the starting point in building a true learning community due to the constructive atmosphere, of trust and mutual collaboration, students feel respected, valued, useful, gaining confidence in their own strengths because everyone participates in decision-making, individual performances to be highlighted only if the performances of the group as a whole are good (Ionescu, M., Bocoş, M., 2017, pp. 257-258).

Oprea L.C. (2006) states that learning through cooperation or collaboration is a pedagogical strategy that encourages participants in the educational process to work together in micro-groups, of a maximum of 6 people, in order to achieve a common goal.

Cooperative learning takes place based on the following principles:

1. Positive interdependence – in which the success of the group depends on a joint effort to accomplish tasks by all members.

2. Individual responsibility – where each member of the group has an assumed responsibility for the task to be solved.

3. Forming and growing social capacities - with the aim of stimulating interpersonal intelligence aimed at providing communication skills with others, to accept receiving and offering support and also managing conflict situations.

4. Face-to-face interaction - involves direct contact with the work partner, as well as arranging the furniture in order to create small interaction groups.

5. Dividing tasks inside the group - involves analyzing the methods of solving the tasks by each individual member and the entire group.

Student centered learning

Student-centered learning is a broad approach that can be achieved by replacing traditional methods with actively participatory methods, “the integration of learning programs at the student's own pace and group cooperation situations” which makes the student responsible for his own progress in education. (Petrovski, N., 2012, p. 43) The author mentions that, in order to be at the center of the learning act, it is necessary for the student to become the subject of the educational process, to take responsibility for the learning results, to learn independently and acquire self-training capabilities, to be able to think independently and critically, to improve in the application of modern information technologies, to be able to generate ideas and work in a team.

Within the course support "Student-centered learning. Guide for teachers and trainers" (Phare Program, 2005) we identified the following principles underlying the student-centered instructional process:

- The main character of the didactic activity is the student and not the teacher, the teacher's role being to lead the students' learning process:
- Accepting the fact that the learning process does not take place only in the classroom and only in the presence of the teaching staff, the understanding of the learning process must also be known by the students;
- Students should be encouraged to be actively involved in planning and managing their own learning;
- During lessons, several types of activities are used, so that the learning styles that the students prefer are used (visual, auditory, practical/kinetic). Under the teacher's guidance students discover new knowledge, which require their active participation in learning. At the end of the lesson students will be asked to reflect on the knowledge they have learned and on how learning and assessment has taken place.

3. Psycho-pedagogical research

3.1. The objective of the research

Measuring the impact on the performance of students in the subjects included in the curricular area "Human and Society" following the participation of teaching staff in training programs and international mobility.

3.2. Research hypothesis

It is assumed that, by participating in training programs, mobilities and international projects, teachers will acquire psycho-pedagogical skills, which can be used in the design and support of the didactic approach of subjects included in the "Human and Society" curricular area.

3.3. Participants

In the participant batch we included 30 teachers who teach "Social Education - Critical Thinking and Children's Rights" subject. 11 teachers who work in rural areas and 19 teachers who work in urban areas took part in the survey, 8 of the respondents are male, 22 are female.

According to seniority in education, the distribution of the teachers who responded to the survey is as follows: the largest share has teachers who have been teaching for over 30 years in education (38,9%), followed by those teaching for 25 to 30 years (22.2%), the lowest share is teachers teaching for 20 to 25 years, respectively, for 10 to 15 years.

Regarding the last graduated teaching degree, we noticed that most of the teachers who answered have the teaching degree I (77.8%), 16.17% have the teaching degree II, the lowest share being the teachers with an entry degree.

3.4. Research instruments

The questionnaire regarding the survey of the opinion of teachers who teach the "Social Education - Critical Thinking and Children's Rights" subject regarding the pedagogical ways of applying interactive group strategies in the classroom, advantages and disadvantages of these didactic methods for the training/development of the student's communication and social interaction skills, in relation to other teaching methods, techniques and procedures.

The questionnaire was applied in the final stage (declarative research). The questionnaire was applied online to a group of 30 teachers who teach Social Education, with the help of the Google forms application (component of the GSuite platform), being distributed within the working groups of the collectives of teachers from schools located in Constanța county between February and April 2022.

3.5. Research results

We can notice that the competences and learning style of the student were selected most often, and the ones with a lower frequency are the methodological suggestions from the school curriculum and assessment strategies. From teachers' options regarding the methods most often used in the classroom, the largest share is represented by collaborative learning methods and methods based on the creative production of ideas. 43% of teachers answered that they very much master the didactic conditions for applying frequently used methods, 33% to a great extent, only 7% affirming that they rarely master the didactic conditions for applying frequently used methods.

Regarding the advantages of the correct selection of didactic strategies, teachers had the most answers chosen in the area of the development of key skills, motivation for learning and students' understanding of contents. The least advantages were related to time management and classroom management.

Analyzing the responses of the teachers, we found that their options regarding the elements that define a modern didactic strategy refer primarily to focusing on the needs of the student (29 answers), includes interactive techniques and procedures (28 answers), capitalizes on the critical spirit and creative thinking (26 answers). Regarding the role of interactive group strategies, all survey respondents chose communication and collaboration, another 28 responses referred to interpersonal relationships and social interaction, 25 teachers chose the spirit of initiative, capitalizing on experiences and individual knowledge (23 teachers) and creativity (22 teachers).

Among teachers who teach "Social Education" participating in the survey 46% (14 teachers) use to a very large extent interactive teaching strategies in the classroom activity and 37% (11 teachers) use them to a large extent, 10% (3 teachers) sometimes use them, and 7% (2 teachers) rarely do.

Among the interactive/innovative didactic strategies frequently used by the teacher in the teaching-learning activity, the largest share has *Project*, *Portfolio* (28 teachers), *Gallery Tour* (26 teachers). The methods: *I know/I want to know/I learned* (22 teachers), *Think - work in pairs - communicate* and *Case study* (20 teachers), *Discussion map* and *Clusters* (21 teachers) also have a fairly high frequency. Other methods used with an average frequency: *Cooperation*

Council (19 teachers), *Brainstorming and Venn Diagram* (18 teachers). Less frequently used methods: *Mosaic, the Cube, Mutual teaching, RAI* (less than 10 answers).

The expression of teachers' options led to the following results regarding the advantages of using interactive teaching strategies in the classroom: 28 teachers chose the development of social skills, 26 teachers identified the development of social interrelationship, 25 teachers believe that students learn from each other, not only from the teacher, a number of 18 teachers consider the appreciation of cultural diversity as an advantage.

Teachers chose the following statements to the open question regarding the disadvantages of interactive group strategies: *team work will not always succeed in integrating shy and less communicative children, the productivity of some children can sometimes decrease, in collaboration with other colleagues, some students tend to dominate the group, one may overlook the ultimate goal in learning, paying more attention to intra-group relations.*

4. Conclusions

a. Involvement in international collaboration projects

Rapid technological progress determines long life learning, generating the need for education systems to quickly adapt to this reality. Learning foreign languages, acquiring digital and entrepreneurial skills, critical thinking, problem solving have become essential skills for students. eTwinning stands for "Community of Schools in Europe". Teachers from Europe can register on the site and have the opportunity to use the eTwinning tools, portal and desktop to get to know each other, exchange ideas and practical examples, teachers can form groups and participate in seminars, training activities and international projects".¹

An eTwinning project can only take place if at least two schools from two different European countries are involved. Teams of teachers, librarians, principals and students from all over Europe can participate in the project. All projects are carried out with the help of information and communication technologies (I.C.T.), collaboration can take place for a single subject or it can be interdisciplinary, schools communicate and collaborate on online communication platforms. E-Twinning projects do not benefit from financial support, there are no administrative restrictions, and face-to-face meetings are not necessarily required. Preschool, primary, secondary and high school education units can participate in an eTwinning project (students' age can be 3 to 19).

The *etwinning.net* platform provides users with "pedagogical tools that integrate new technologies into the learning process; facilitates cooperation activities with schools from other participating countries and, implicitly, a better knowledge of them, involvement in common curricular activities. With the help of this platform, teachers have access to a European network and opportunities for professional development, by collaborating in international projects and by participating in international training seminars/experience exchanges."²

The platform offers an attractive learning environment for students and teachers, official recognition and greater visibility of the participants' activity at national and European level; annual awards and national and European quality certificates for the best projects.

Seahe@rted Kids Project, in collaboration with students and teachers from Portugal, Turkey, Italy, Romania, Jordan, Croatia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Spain, France, Georgia, Malta, Greece, Poland, Albania aims to make young people aware of the importance of the sea and ocean in people's lives, their impact on the formation of human communities and interaction.

Among the objectives of this project is the awareness of personal and social identity by exploring the local context, the identification of differences/similarities between different

peoples and cultures, the developing of an attitude of solidarity and tolerance towards different cultures, the search for solutions, collaboratively, active learning as a community of colleagues, the training of critical thinking, autonomy and creativity.

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