

GEO-LITERACY AS THE BASIS OF THE BUILDING OF CULTURAL IDENTITY.

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Abstract

Geo-literacy is the most important skill for the 21st century citizens for built identity of groups but also for the personal development of citizens, enabling them to find their place in society. It also serves as a source of inspiration for the development of people personalities and abilities and plays a key role in providing the sense of belonging, combining the value of national citizenship to the EU citizenship. In this paper, we will try to present topics that can be incorporated in school Geography curricula in order to place geo-literacy at the heart of the modern school, offering the capability of overcoming the current crisis, decreasing phenomena as xenophobia, and racism while supporting democracy, human rights, and dignity.

Keywords: geo-literacy, school curricula, cultural identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Literacy, as Unesco states (2004), is a person's "ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society."

Despite the fact that literacy has its roots in linguistics, in our days overtakes its close relationship with the language and relates to what is a social individual activity. It refers to the set of skills, practices, usage of various texts allowing the individual to manage his social life through his participation in areas of social activity (Papadopoulou, 2011).

In school geography, the term literacy following the model of textbooks but also of a teaching method that wanted the student to know details about the landscape, was limited to sterile knowledge of natural and anthropogenic characteristics of the world. The knowledge of rivers, lakes, states, capitals, etc. was enough in order to characterize someone as to the high or low level of literacy.

National Geographic Education (<http://education.nationalgeographic.com>) tried a definition in order to transfer the term in geography education. It identified the geographic literacy as comprehension both of human and natural systems, and of the geographical and systematic decision-making process. According to Edelson (2014) "Geo-literacy enables people to steer away from choices that will be costly for themselves and others." Through this dimension, the geographic literacy involves a better comprehension of the complexity of the

world, of interconnections that exist in this as well as the manner in which decisions of a community affect other communities and vice versa.

The term in the field of geography education is combined by the so-called “three I’s” (<http://education.nationalgeographic.com>):

Interactions: Concerning the understanding of human and natural systems and focus on the function and interaction among them i.e. how natural systems or how political or economic systems interact.

Interconnections: Help in developing geographical reasoning through the understanding how a place is linked to another (i.e. historical or geographical connections in different scales from local to global and across different sciences. The kind of growing relationships, make the places suitable or not for the activities development.

Implications: Relating to the systematic decision making and the justification and understanding of the connections so that students are able to make informed decisions for the future.

It is readily understood that the lack of geoliteracy recommends people with a poor mental map, not capable to understand the complexity of the world since they recognize it as a fragmented concoction that includes phenomena and processes unrelated to each other (Gritzner, 2003).

2. GEO – LITERACY AND IDENTITY

The conception of identity gathers the homogeneous elements through which the groups define themselves, achieving consistency of common characteristics, which in their turn help to be maintained through time and prevent potential danger of their elimination (national origin, race, ancestry, social status, sex, economic status, language, religion, customs, etc.). The identity is a mental construction changing in time that helps to self-determination of the individual. It is variable data, as it constitutes the product of a dynamic procedure of social and historical construction. The same happens with the cultural identity. During his development, the individual appropriates and incorporates norms, values, and representations of his environment’s culture. He builds in this way a cultural identity that he shares with other members of his group. This is the familiar phenomenon of socialization starting from childhood and lasts throughout the duration of our lives. Any person can define himself in his own special way according to his beliefs. Therefore, there is no doubt that the constitution of identity does not only involve the energy of his self-determination, but through implications also includes the comparing, acceptance or exclusion, and in general the determining of the identity of the “other” (Nova-Kaltsouni, 1998).

Geography, in the range of dealing with culture, examines the groups, their differentiation and their distribution in space, the ideas connecting them and how groups perceive the space. It locates "objects, ideas, and practices that constitute cultures and identifies how cultures form identities through which people recognize themselves and others" (Grang, 1998).

These processes sometimes are approached on a global scale (macro-geographies) and sometimes on a small scale focusing on the daily microcosm (micro-geographies). The "obedience" of all individuals to the same ecumenical laws concerning religion, history or rationality, results in the separation or in conflict. Through the development of technology, economic development and international trade, the world we live in is becoming increasingly smaller. This is one of the results of globalization. The above procedure while increasing the

interconnectedness between cultures, people, and systems at an international level, intensifies the division at a local level, making the geo-literacy more necessary than ever.

3. GEO – LITERACY AND SCHOOL GEOGRAPHY

The modern greek educational system and consequently the modern greek school has undergone a series of significant changes in the structure and characteristics of the social reference framework as a result of a series of interconnected developments in the international environment and within national societies (globalization, international migration, pluralism of values and lifestyle, empowering of old and new forms of social inequalities, social exclusion, etc.). For the modern school whose main characteristic is multiculturalism, the configuration of symmetrical interaction relations between identity and alterity, poses a challenge of central importance.

May the geographical literacy assist in the structuring of the cultural identity as a counterpart and exceedance of dilemmas, distortions, and bipolarity? May geo-literacy via school geography to contribute in order people to coexist as equal and different?

Based on Greek and on other European countries curricula, we identified some topics that can be the starting point for the development of attitudes, skills and open-mindedness to the citizen of the future in order to accept, respect and coexist with "the different". The thematic sections proposed are indicative. Clearly the educator can spot more topics related to the identity and acceptance of otherness. However in this paper, the criteria for the selection of topics rely more on utilizing the experience of students, on an easy development of proposed themes by them and on accessibility to information (Internet, newspapers etc.).

3.1 Proposed thematic sections

3.1.1 We and the others - Different habits, different people

This topic focuses on the identification of identity and culture of others through "our" identity. Each group tends to understand its own habits or traditions as expected and habits of other peculiar. The geo-literacy helps to identify the different "rules" that are behind each culture. Example: Students can discuss people's attitudes toward animals and the practical implications deriving from what are considered the appropriate codes of behaviour in the attitude towards animals in a diversity of situations. These issues are received in different ways in different cultures according to the prevalent view of the nature of animals. In many instances, different cultural attitudes towards animals are affected by religious traditions. Through the search for elements of culture is emerging the identity of the different nations. Something that to the European seems strange for the Indian seems normal and vice versa. So in India, the cows move undisturbed in the street without anyone bothers them, whereas in Europe the cows are part of livestock production. Dogs in the European culture are animals closely related to the concept of home and storage. The violence against dogs is a crime. In Cantonese cuisine or the cuisine of Vietnam, the dog and cat eating are included in the daily diet. In Cambodia, the soup of tarantulas is deemed a delightful delicacy, while in Mexico tequila instead of nuts is combined with fried grasshoppers. Any of the above groups can be described as more or less "barbaric". Such examples function as catalysts and make much easier the understanding of the differences between various cultures of nations.

3.1.2 Who said that there are no invisible borders?

Groups within the groups? The recognition and understanding of territorial divisions within the same space is another theme of geo-literacy, which contributes to the understanding of identity and alterity. Separations defining different identities exist even within the same space. The religion, the football team, the art are some of the topics that constitute separations. The reference to graffiti as an expression of ideological separation can be a starting point for discussion, acceptance and understanding of the identity of different people living together in the same space. As an example could be used graffiti works that one sees in New York's walls (e.g. the political protest and satire of Banksy) versus the graffiti work in European cities where often it is considered as an embellishment (tendency of architecture for an alternative expression in order to be given light to dark from the flue walls). The graffiti in areas of Los Angeles and San Francisco where they reside mainly African Americans or in Sao Paulo might be another "exercise" of reading symbolic representations and encodings used by illegal groups to evade the law or designate their territory, many times even to those who disdain law. Students get excited when they start to read the hidden messages of graffiti (i.e. an arrow showing the boundary of the region, or letters replacement in order to highlight the identity, numbers showing the group code etc.). A discussion on the importance or problems arising from the understanding or not of territorial divisions within the same space can sensitize the students and help them realize that identity is not a matter of existing borders defined between the states with certain agreements or contracts. Identities may be intangible borders which however can be equally rigid with actual.

3.1.3 Buildings' Symbolic Geographies

How are buildings signifying space? How is this signification linked to the creation of identity? The recognition of the signification of the spaces of this theme refers to an unusual type symbolism for students. For example, the Library or Academy existence refers to a learning space, the cafeteria in meeting and acquaintances place, the student haunt or bar in a place frequented by certain age people with declared occupation and interests. Many times buildings or monuments in a place propose symbolic geographies and are used as groups coalescent medium. The existence of a University increases the tolerances of social groups in "different" (university asylum), likewise, a statue helps the state to promote the image of a nation or group highlighting its characteristics and requiring indirectly from the surrounding the acceptance and compliance.

3.1.4 Let's celebrate!

The role of religious or national holidays is important for identifying groups with a common identity. Both of them keep traditions alive and strengthen the coherence of teams. Each country has its own characteristic festivities and every group of people has -and if not-creates the framework that fosters extroversion and highlights the diversity and uniqueness of the group. So, Easter, Christmas, the November 17th, the October 28th are important celebrations for Greece. Similarly almost all states have their reference points: the July 4th is celebrated the Independence Day and on November 17th the day of Thanksgiving in the US, the July 14th is the day of the Independence in France, the November 28th and 29th are days of independence for Albania, and the Passover is an important celebration for Jews. In these celebrations can be added and discussed with particular interest some others related to the modern culture, the consumerism or the attitude towards the environment namely the

commercial festivals and the awareness celebrations such as the day of Saint Valentine, the Father's Day, the energy world day etc.

3.1.5 The journey of words (Loan-words and anti-loans)

The language of each group as a carrier of culture, different languages, the local dialect, loans and anti-loans in other words “the journey of words” is another theme of geo-literacy. The languages of peoples are changing, evolving, updated. There exist words in each language that are common or have common roots with words of other languages. Unaltered words, transported and fit in the vernacular. People who “carry” with them words from their country or words from their travels. The wanderings of words are charming through time, from language to language. The phenomenon of linguistic loans is probably common to all languages consisting their renewal and enrichment factor. The careful study of such words constitutes an interesting commentary on the history of culture and identity. Students can almost estimate the role which various peoples have played in the development and spread of cultural ideas by taking note of the extent to which their vocabularies have filtered into those of other peoples as well as the common linguistic past and the osmosis of languages over time.

3.1.6 The management of diversity

The term diversity is widely known in the natural sciences. In human geography diversity marks the coexistence of specific social groups in an area. The area may be a city, a neighbourhood, etc. In the last decades, cities have become more diverse than ever before.

The existence of the diversity or not, affects the actual development of the group. Lately, a multitude of terms comes to specify diversity. So we find terms like super diversity which “intended to underline a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything previously experienced in a particular society” (Vertovec, St. 2006) or hyper-diversity a term which makes clear that we should look at urban diversity in a very open way and refers to “an intense diversification of the population in socio-economic, social and ethnic terms, but also with respect to lifestyles, attitudes, and activities.” (European Policy brief, 2013). The diversity as a theme of geo-literacy can further be approached through characteristic descriptions and images of our time. Some of the examples may be indicative of problems created by the lack of diversity: An unemployed person living in a jobless region and trying to find work in the place where he lives is rather difficult to accomplish since there is no diversity on the labor supply. The positive side of diversity is identified of the opportunities and the acceptance of Culture. Its management helps to avoid quickly and casually categorizations of people. For example, some people may live at some place in a city, but their actual activities are located in another place. Therefore, anyone depicted in an environment does not mean that belonging to or living in it.

4. CONSIDERATION - DISCUSSION

In a multicultural society, where the coexistence of people with different origins, different cultures and different identities evolve dynamically, is highlighted the importance of geographic literacy in everyday life.

To characterize someone as a literate in the 21st century is more than to know to write or to read. There is a need to think critically, to distinguish the links and interdependencies, to

process information and reach conclusions according to specific criteria that will be able to host them. (Hatzisavidis, 2007).

The studies in the field of literacy often differ on the basis of the various directions in which the term is approximated. The functional literacy refers to the skills that one needs to succeed and meet the needs of the modern market while the critical literacy aims to raise public awareness, in the functions of different forms of literacy and the development of critical thinking. In any case, literacy as a framework has its ideological aspect that indicates that shaped forms through ideological positions associated with forms of social power. Literacy skills also “affect social status, the level of political participation, opportunities for cultural expression, health, the survival of languages, access to social services and opportunities to learn” (OECD, 1997).

The role of education and in particular of the geographical education is catalytic since it enables through the themes selected to reach an understanding of our own identity and the identity of others as a structural element of the harmonious coexistence of humans. The methodology proposed by the geography can be described as evolutionary with a strong element of transformation of the original knowledge or information: From the designed, i.e. the initial resources that has at his disposal the student, in design that relates to the new meaning forming process and from there to the redesign which constitutes something completely new, a new resource at the level we are examining.

Clearly, the identification of thematic units is an extremely difficult task because the boundaries of each theme vary in content, but also because they are part of a culture or individual ideology. So, the approaches of topics vary depending on the type of filter that we analyze (ideological, cultural, scientific, economic, etc.) nevertheless, there can be no European identity, to take ownership of the future generations besides their national, if deeply conservative stereotypes of the past are not combated and if they are not replaced by a new mixture of culture and values. Since every training program is a slow stiff process from both teachers and by society itself to accept and digest any dynamic change, actions in the field of non-formal education could lead to a substantial geo-literacy of citizens. Multimedia applications, enriched with photos, travels, videos, descriptions, cultural sources and observations of the world would be a good starting point to adopt good social practices which will contribute to the development of critical thinking, in the growing of acceptance of the different and on understanding of the cultural identity through the geographic literacy.

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