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A new method for citizenship education

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to offer some new possibilities in citizenship education for children with special needs. One of the authors has been teaching for several years at a school for physically disabled children, and has found inspiration for this topic in seeking interesting and motivating methods for these children. The method of trips and excursions is an interesting and especially effective one. A concrete example is presented – a trip to the capital of the Czech Republic – and is shown to fit not only the idea of citizenship education in civics but also the important tenets of Czech educational policy set by official Ministry of Education documents. It is important to tackle the method as an interdisciplinary one and to include project learning.

The importance of citizenship education

Citizenship education is priceless for today's society, as each person has direct influence on events and situation in a particular society. Next to the goal to educate a balanced, morally mature and honest being, as Pitha (1992, p12) puts it, there is another, no less important goal, which is to educate a citizen. This is just one of the main goals of today's schools – to educate a future citizen of a particular state.

Kucerova (2001, p 21) gives five key stages in the education of a citizen. The first is the formation of identity, which is a process leading to identification of the person with larger or smaller social groups. What is important during the process of identification is accepting the values of the particular social group and their maintenance. Another key stage is education leading towards humanity and tolerance. According to Kucerova this helps to overcome social differences in society. The third significant point is the skill of discussion. During citizenship education exchanging opinions that are based on real knowledge of the problem is necessary. Another very important point is leading the children towards understanding civil rights and duties. Last but not least, teaching moral autonomy is important. The stress is put on democratic upbringing within the family.

Children should gradually identify with the society they live in, and should accept and respect its values, and keep and transpose them to further generations. However, this process of identification becomes much more complicated for those who enter it with some handicap, disability, or other special needs. The handicap disturbs the links with the surrounding society and impedes the creation of healthy relations with social groups other than those with similar problems. Moreover, if the disability is physically visible, so that it differentiates the person, this can create psychic barriers on both sides, which often makes the integration of people with special needs into society difficult, if not impossible. In the case of physical disability there are also physical barriers - unsuitable or inaccessible buildings, pavements, roads etc. Many means of public transport in the Czech Republic are not adjusted to the needs of people with physical handicaps.

A special section in the education of children with special needs concerns the problem of the so-called 'special schools', which have become a sensitive topic with the tendency toward integration. Nevertheless, these schools are still maintained in our republic, essentially practical reasons. Special schools are basic schools for children with certain handicaps. The children are taught the same curriculum as at mainstream schools, with the exception of schools for children with mental disabilities. Even if a large proportion of pupils are integrated into mainstream schools, there will remain children whose degree of handicap does not allow them to fully integrate. An advantage of the special schools in the Czech Republic is the average number of pupils in each class, which is between six and nine children: this enables the teachers to apply an individual approach and gives time enough for each particular child. Moreover, apart from the teacher there is always an assistant present to help the teacher. The children usually have the possibility of rehabilitation at school and the building is adapted to make the children feel safe and to enable them to move independently as much as possible. The teachers and the assistants teaching at special schools have to undergo special teacher training courses to be able to understand the special needs of their pupils.

One problem of these schools is their physical detachment from the outside world. The world of the pupils attending these schools is very limited. Talking to a child with a grave physical handicap, one can find that their lives and worlds include their homes, the way to school by car, the school itself - and not much more. Their handicaps often do not allow the children to spend the time after school going out with their friends, and the number of home activities these children can do is very limited.

The citizenship education of children with special needs is complicated by the limitations caused by their particular handicap. If we return to Kucerova's first key stage of citizenship education – identification with smaller as well as larger social groups - we see that we have to facilitate also the process of the identification of these children with the larger social group, which means to mediate contact with this larger group in the first place and thus physically enable the creation of a positive relation. Disregarding the obstacles, the goal is to lead the children in the same direction as healthy children. In spite of their seclusion from the society of healthy people, we do not want them to identify only with the group of other disabled people. We want them, while looking for their identity, to exceed the limits of their handicap and find their place in society. Our goal is to make *all* children citizens, realising all the rights and duties deriving from the relationship between the citizen and the state. Also we should not forget that becoming a citizen is not a final goal but a means to the way into united Europe.

Citizenship education in conceptual documents of the Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic

The Czech Ministry of Education has issued two important documents: the National Program of Education Development in the Czech Republic (the so-called *White Book*) and the Standard of Basic Education.

The *White Book* creates a clear framework for how Czech education should move in the future. It devotes a special chapter to the education of physically and socially disadvantaged children:

It is necessary to essentially change the traditional concept of education, to adjust its content, form and methods to the needs of children and pupils with special needs and ensure wide social support for this change. The needed changes are connected with both the physical access to education (architectonic adjustment of buildings including the interiors, equipping the schools with compensatory aids etc.), and qualitative pedagogical and organisation changes, with the possibility to respect the individuality of children and their needs and differentiate the education methods and individualise education instead of applying standardised teaching plans. (*Narodni program rozvoje vzdelavani v Ceske republice*, 2001, p 45)

The other document - the Standard of Basic Education (*Standard zakladniho vzdelavani*, 1995, str.26) - claims that the process of education should be directed towards

- acquiring knowledge of the history and geography of one's own country, state law, social politics, economy, ecology and anthropology, which are important disciplines for civic life and for forming morally responsible behaviour
- understanding the principles of the democratic state and the economic life of society
- creating the idea of the significance of human rights and duties and understanding the importance of respecting the principles of democracy
- gaining usable knowledge of the law and orientation in important legal questions and practical application of the tenets of responsible decision-making
- acquiring the basic idea of creating values, of consumption, market and of the principles of micro and macro economy
- learning ways to behave as a responsible and active citizen of a democratic society and to create one's own moral profile in accordance with generally accepted moral codes
- developing the ability to judge and compare social phenomena in one's own country with similar or contrasting phenomena in both European and world contexts, creating an idea of local as well as global problems of contemporary society and about ways of solving them on local, national and international levels
- gaining orientation for choosing a future career
- gaining orientation in various situations in personal, emotional, family, work and civic life and in basic life values, which should be a support in dealing with various life situations and in creating relationships with other people and social groups.

Citizenship education in the school subject Civics

The civics curriculum consists of six main segments – historic and geographical, legal, economic, anthropologic, ecological and political. Apart from these main segments

civics also reflects on knowledge of other scientific branches such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, ethics, and aesthetics.

As Pitha (1992, p 14) claims, the goal of the historic and geographical segment is to make the pupils feel an identity with their national community. The young people should incorporate such values as the cultural wealth, history, language and beauty of the country. The ideal goal is for the young people to accept these values as their own, and to identify with them. The legal segment wants the pupils to realise that life within society is bound by certain rules. The legal system of a state gives each citizen particular rights, but also duties. Understanding the legal system and its positive as well as negative sides leads to understanding the democracy. The goal of the economic part is to teach the principles of economy from the level of personal life, through family economy to the state level. The anthropological segment enables them to understand the uniqueness of human existence and shows the children a path to being adults. The ecological segment aims at leading the children towards behaviour that does not damage the environment. The political segment introduces the possibilities of co-existence of individuals in civic society.

A trip as a method to citizenship education

The *White Book* introduces a requirement for new methods. Kalhous *et al.* (2002, p309) understands method as a way to the goal, and teaching method as a way to a teaching goal. The method advises 'how to do it' and thus in what way the pupils are to fulfil certain tasks while mediating the interaction between teacher and pupil. The question of choosing the teaching method becomes most important, especially because it is being answered by every teacher on almost everyday basis.

As Obst (Kalhous, Obst, 2002, p168) presents it, the knowledge and abilities gained at schools are obtained in a culture different from the one where they originated. For special schools this is even more true. The space of the special school is clearly restricted. It is the kind of environment which is not only remote from the reality of other basic schools, but most of all from the reality of the world outside.

It seems that one of the possibilities of fulfilling the goals of citizenship education set by the education program for basic schools is organising trips or excursions. The pupils have a chance to meet new subject matter in an environment utterly different from the one they are used to. Moreover, it is an authentic environment and it is the authenticity that is very important. Obst (Kalhous, Obst, 2002, p168) characterises authenticity as genuineness, credibility, and reality. Authentic teaching reaches not only beyond the limits of a teaching unit, but also beyond the limits of the subject, class, school and the school region. Both trips and excursions fulfil the conditions of authentic learning. During these activities pupils are really moving out of school and in a real, authentic environment they acquire new information.

A trip to Prague as a method of citizenship education

One of the ways to bring a trace of authenticity into citizenship education is to organise a trip to the capital of a particular country. In the Czech Republic, this is Prague. Prague is an exquisite place that, from the point of view of the teacher of civics, offers historic, geographical, and especially political authenticity. Moreover, as our capital Prague is a topic of not only civics. While civics is taught at our schools from the sixth grade, the topic 'Our country', which includes a chapter about Prague as our capital, occurs much earlier. Later this topic becomes a part of disciplines such as geography, history and obviously civics. Therefore, the trip to Prague is an appropriate practical addition to the theoretical knowledge children gain at school.

It is suitable to organise the trip for the pupils of the last grade – the ninth - because in this year their knowledge of the theme is quite complex. The length of the trip is up to the teachers, but approximately from two to six days. The main responsibility for preparing the program stays with the teachers of civics but the pupils should also be given the opportunity to participate in it.

A trip to Prague as project teaching

Another important element of a trip like this is a form of project teaching. Obst (Kalhous, Obst, 2002, p 299) presents following important aspects of project teaching:

- In the learning project the pupils have an influence on the choice and closer definition of the theme. The process of learning including this aspect is marked by openness. The program of learning is not prepared to each detail before the project itself starts, so that the program is not something completely fixed and given.
- The project is connected with out-of-school reality. It reflects the experience of the pupils and is not only a kind of substitute reality for teaching.
- The project is based on the assumption that the pupils are interested in it, work on it from their own interest, without the need of external motivation and that they enjoy the work.
- The learning project lead to concrete results, on the basis of which the pupils can gain not only knowledge and qualification but also from the solution, leading to an award.

A trip to Prague complies with all these aspects. Next to the teacher of civics, who has to keep the didactic aspect of the trip in mind, the pupils also play a very active role in planning the trip. It is obviously an out-of-school activity in an authentic environment. The activity is very motivating for the pupils if they have the opportunity to plan their trip. And last but not least, they are 'rewarded' by seeing places many of them would not have a chance to visit otherwise.

The fact that the trip is organised by the teacher of civics does not mean that the theme should be dealt with only in this subject. Other teachers are encouraged to make use of the activity and find related topics in their subjects to support the interdisciplinarity and complexity of the project. The idea is to intertwine as many subjects as possible.

To give a few examples: the students are prepared for a visit to the theatre. The teacher should prepare the children for it, choosing in discussion with the pupils a suitable performance, talk about the dramatist, and so on. The pupils can be introduced to the National Theatre. History reminds the children of the importance of Prague in the history of not only our country but also the whole Europe. It can also introduce the historical places the children are to visit. Mathematics is applied when children prepare the budget of the project. It is combined with computer science where children are taught to use a computer program to make the activity easier. They also have to work with the Internet to find the price of accommodation, travel costs, opening hours and entrance fees into museums, etc.

Evaluation of the educational contribution of the trips

If we organise the trips with an educational aim in mind, another question that appears is the one of evaluation. The way to evaluate the project is something I am still working on. One of the methods we are currently using is making a special display after the trip. The children prepare a board for other pupils, parents and teachers informing them about the details of the trip. It includes pictures, various materials they brought while away, pieces of information they gained, their own evaluation of the trip as well as evaluation of those who come to see the board. The evaluation process is something I want to improve for future projects.

Conclusion

Citizenship education for children with special needs forces those responsible to look constantly for new methods and approaches. This paper has tried to present the possibility of using the method of trips and excursions. This method develops in a unique way the goals set by the official documents of Czech educational policy and seems to be especially applicable and effective for children with special needs.

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