

Elementary school teachers' beliefs and classroom practices related to teaching cultural universals¹

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Abstract

Cultural universals are conceptual systems of categories (e.g. family, living place, clothing, holidays, transportation, communication, etc.) which are present in all human societies, but these categories have different meanings and characteristics across cultures (Alleman & Brophy, 2001, 2002, 2003; Reidel & Draper, 2013). In the United States these categories are the core social science topics which are studied by elementary school students. According to Hungarian studies elementary school teachers often feel that their university studies do not prepare them to teach social science topics such as cultural universals properly. The main aim of our study is to investigate elementary school teachers' beliefs about cultural universals, their social science education related goals (e.g. reducing stereotypes, fostering tolerance, sensitising students to social issues) and their classroom practices to promote these goals. Data will be collected with two different methods. First, structured interviews are conducted with at least 10 elementary school teachers to collect data about their beliefs and their teaching methods. The result of the qualitative analysis will be used to develop an online questionnaire and to extend the investigation to broader sample size. At least 120 teachers will be participated in the study from different schools in Hungary. Data collection will be carried out with the eDia online electronic diagnostic system. The results of the study help to explore the elementary school teachers' opinion on teaching cultural universals, their beliefs related to social science education and to collect the good practices. The outcomes are also valuable to reveal the country-specific characteristics of social science education and to improve teacher education.

Keywords: social studies, elementary school, teachers' beliefs

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Social studies education in the lower grades of elementary school

Cultural universals – or also known as universal social and cultural phenomena – are the building blocks of human culture (e.g. meals, communication, money, family structures, government, etc.), which are present in every society (Alleman & Brophy, 2001, 2002, 2003; Reidel & Draper, 2013). Processing universal social and cultural phenomena in school aims to lay the foundation for students' literacy in social studies while exploiting the possibilities of subject integration. At the same time, national research on educational science has been dealing with this topic sporadically, therefore, we know little about the methods of processing such phenomena at school (Kinyó, 2018).

In the 21st century, it is crucial to have classroom lessons targeted at universal social and cultural phenomena and the different cultures of the world. It is indicated by the latest initiative of the OECD, attempting to measure the so-called global competence. According to the interpretation of the organisation, global competence is a complex set of knowledge, enabling an individual to assess local, global and intercultural questions, understand others' position, communicate with others efficiently, and contribute to sustainability and general welfare by acting responsibly (OECD, 2018). The effort to measure global competence proves that there is intensified international interest in developing literacy in social studies, it is an important expectation towards the school of the 21st century. Nevertheless, it is not in itself sufficient to formulate goals. It is essential for the teachers to be prepared for teaching social studies themes, as without sound and well-established methodological knowledge, children can only reach naive beliefs or misconceptions related to social phenomena (Reidel & Draper, 2013), which may entail the danger of intensifying negative attitudes and stereotypes about people living in other parts of the world (Beal & Bates, 2010).

Teachers and teaching social studies themes

Based on the findings of international surveys, teachers in general are satisfied with their professional competence. The TALIS research (*Teaching and Learning International Survey*) arranged by the OECD uses a complex approach to study the opinion of teachers teaching in the upper grades of elementary school (5–8th grades) on their teaching practice, the circumstances of teaching and learning, their relation to the school as a working place and the opportunities of professional development. The research intends to provide a comprehensive overview of the teaching profession, from the motives of choosing a teaching career through mentoring to everyday teaching practice (Balázs & Vadász, 2019). The TALIS research (Balázs & Vadász, 2019) investigates teachers' beliefs and practice in terms of teaching in general, thus it is not suitable to provide a picture

of the questions about teaching social studies themes. On the other hand, the findings of the research are useful to learn about the general context.

The questionnaire of the 2018 TALIS survey was filled in by 3245 teachers working in the 5–8th grades of elementary school and 182 institution leaders from Hungary. The results show that over 90% of the Hungarian teachers felt that they had adequate subject, subject pedagogical and general pedagogical knowledge, as well as teaching practice. In comparison with the countries participating in the study, it can be stated that they considered themselves significantly more prepared than the OECD average. The research also investigated the areas the teachers most need the organisation of further training in. Similarly, to the OECD average, the teachers would like to have more opportunities of further training related to the teaching of students with special educational needs, the pedagogical utilisation of information and communications technologies, and teaching in a multicultural environment. By contrast, regarding the subject-specific teaching material, only 5.4% of the respondents would like to expand their knowledge, while 6.5% requires the development of knowledge and understanding related to the subject area(s) (Balázs & Vadász, 2019). These results suggest that, with a few exceptions, the teachers are satisfied with their pedagogical preparedness and subject knowledge. Of course, as in the case of every self-assessment-based data collection, it should be kept in mind that the results reflect the teachers' subjective evaluation.

One of the cornerstones of teaching social studies themes at school is whether teachers (elementary school teachers in the present case) have the subject and subject pedagogical knowledge required to teach cultural universals. According to the findings of a previous research study conducted about 20 years before (Mátrai, 1999), teachers teaching social studies themes in upper elementary grades or secondary school did not acquire the subject knowledge and methodological techniques which could have founded the confident teaching of the themes during their college or university training. Lack of knowledge, immature methodology and the uncertain situation of social studies in Hungary have collectively led to the lack of teachers' confidence. In the meta-analysis of the teacher questionnaires of the IEA CivEd study, Torney-Purta, Richardson & Barber (2005) compared the teaching experience and confidence of teachers in eight countries, Australia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Finland, Hungary, Norway and the United States of America. In political topics, the lowest confidence was found among the teachers of the Czech Republic, England, Hungary and Norway, and in terms of teaching social themes (e.g. cultural diversity, media) the Hungarian teachers gave an account on the lowest confidence. The Hungarian teachers agreed the least with the statement saying

“There is an agreement in society on what should be taught in this area” (Torney-Purta et al., 2005, p43).

Based on these findings we can assume that although teachers are generally confident about their teaching practice, they may have some uncertainty about teaching social studies themes. The results must be explained by the constant changes in the area of social studies, which not only confuse teachers but also present them with further difficulties. In Hungary, the issues of teaching social studies themes represent the blank spot of educational science research, due to which we can assume that they would need more help to teach these themes with more confidence (Dancs & Fülöp, 2020). The current situation – and, presumably, the uncertainty – is further complicated by the change of the core curriculum, according to which the content area of Man and Society was renamed to History and Civics, indicating a shift in emphasis.

Aims and research questions

The primary aim of the research is to explore the beliefs of elementary school teachers about the goals of teaching social-cultural and civilisation themes and the possibilities of processing them in the classroom. This topic has not been addressed by researchers in Hungary; based on the international academic literature and the previous exploratory research related to this topic, the following questions are relevant:

1. How do elementary school teachers relate to universal social and cultural phenomena, how prepared do they consider themselves for communicating the educational material related to human civilisation?
2. How is the intention to develop the literacy in social sciences presented in the goals of elementary school teachers?
3. What is the opinion of elementary school teachers on the specificities of elementary school students' prejudiced thinking?

Methods

Diagnostic tool

At the end 2018, we conducted a focus group interview with 10 elementary school teachers with several years of experience. During the interview, each item of the online questionnaire under preparation was discussed. As a result of the interview, the first version of the questionnaire was expanded with several content elements and we integrated the insights and ideas proposed by the practicing teachers into the final version of the questionnaire.

The final version of the elementary school teachers' online questionnaire applied in the research was finalised in January 2019. The content part of the diagnostic tool – preceded by a general demographic form – contains 76 closed-ended questionnaire items. While composing the questionnaire, our primary focus was to make it suitable to learn about elementary school teachers' beliefs regarding the goals of teaching themes related to society, culture, civilisation and human nature and the possibilities of its implementation in the classroom.

Online questionnaire survey

When selecting the method of data collection, we opted for online data recording, as computer-based data collection has several advantages over traditional paper-and-pencil data recording (Csapó, Molnár & R. Tóth, 2008). In the case of online data collection, almost the entire testing process can be reconstructed through log file analyses. For example, the movement of respondents in a test is traceable (e.g. Kinyó & Dancs, 2015); the path of respondents to a solution can be reconstructed; and the time respondents spent in the test can be defined.

For the data recording of the research we applied non-random sampling procedures. In the first step, we invited Hungarian elementary school teachers in direct networks through informal communications channels, mainly via email and closed, online community forums. With this method we managed to address about 30 respondents directly. After exhausting our informal sources of contact, we addressed other elementary school teachers by requesting schools involved in the nation-wide partner school network of the Szeged Center for Research on Learning and Instruction.

Data collection

The data collection was implemented in the eDia online electronic diagnostic system developed by the Szeged Center for Research on Learning and Instruction (Csapó & Molnár, 2019). The participation in the research was voluntary, with informed consent and ensuring anonymity. The respondents could open the online questionnaire with an individual login identifier sent to their mailbox after providing their email address. After concluding data collection, the administrator of the eDia system ensured the separation of the email addresses and the data base formed in the course of completion, thereby the database prepared for analysis did not contain personal details. The questionnaire could be accessed for 45 days on the internet.

During the completion, progression was indicated by a completion bar. The respondents had the chance to shift between the screens and modify their given

answers. We did not apply forced response; the respondents could proceed in the case of avoiding response. The process of completion – interruption, disruption, or repeated login – could be continued from the point of discontinuation through a given device. The completion of the online questionnaire – based on the log file analyses – took 12 minutes on average (SD=6 minutes).

During the period provided for completion we monitored the number of respondents, then we closed data collection at the beginning of May 2019.

Sample

The online questionnaire reached 149 elementary school teachers in total. Although 19 of them requested a login identifier, they did not start completing the questionnaire. We excluded 7 out of 130 persons from the analyses as although they started the completion, they stopped after the first few questionnaire items and they did not continue later on. The sample consists of 123 elementary school teachers in total. The composition of the respondents according to genders (117 women, 6 men) reflects the Hungarian situation, i.e. the predominance of women working in elementary school teaching profession. The context data draw the attention to another Hungarian phenomenon, to the problem of ageing teaching force. A large part of the sample consists of experienced teachers, who spent 26 years on average in the profession. Overall, the elementary school teachers with many years of experience in the profession substantially outnumber the early-career teachers in our sample.

Results

Social studies themes in the Hungarian National Core Curriculum

In the first item of the content part of the questionnaire, we asked the teachers to indicate on a five-point scale how much they agree with that three social studies themes – events of family life, childhood of parents and grandparents, and the mementos and memorials of the past found in our environment – are included in the contents of the National Core Curriculum (NCC, 2012). Although the teachers basically agreed or totally agreed with the inclusion of the three themes in the curriculum ($M_{\text{family}}=4.9$; $M_{\text{parents}}=4.45$; $M_{\text{past}}=4.44$), the degree of agreement is significantly higher regarding the inclusion of the events of family life in the curriculum than in the case of the mementos and memorials of the past ($Z=-2.1$; $p=0.03$).

Preparedness for teaching themes related to culture and civilisation

In one of the questions of the questionnaire, the elementary school teachers had to assess how prepared they feel to integrate cultural and civilisation themes into

their lessons. We asked the teachers to take a holistic position, the question did not contain orientating examples. Our results suggest that two-thirds of the elementary school teachers feel prepared for teaching these themes. 29% of the respondents feel completely prepared and 39% feel prepared. In the part implying uncertainty, 25% of the teachers selected the “partly yes, partly no” option, and only 7% of the respondents indicated that they are rather not or absolutely not prepared for teaching these themes. The high degree of confidence may be explained by several factors. One of the possible explanations may be that the questionnaire asked for the subjective assessment of a phenomenon, and in these cases most people strive for positive self-assessment; it is obvious that they are less likely to evaluate themselves in a negative way. Another possible explanation for confidence may be that teachers have external and internal resources and solutions supporting their work (e.g. professional competence, high-standard teaching devices and methodological subsidiary materials, colleague assistance within the institution, etc.) which have a positive effect on their self-efficacy and classroom activities.

We assume that the number of years spent in teaching profession is linked to the confidence about teaching the themes, therefore, we studied the connection between the two variables visually and by calculating the correlation coefficients. In Figure 1, each point indicates a teacher. It shows that the assumption that younger elementary school teachers would assess themselves less prepared methodologically is not verified. There is no correlation between the variables and the sample can be regarded homogeneous; the self-assessment-based preparedness of early-career teachers and that of teachers with more than 10 years of teaching experience do not differ significantly ($t=-0.52$, $p=0.6$).

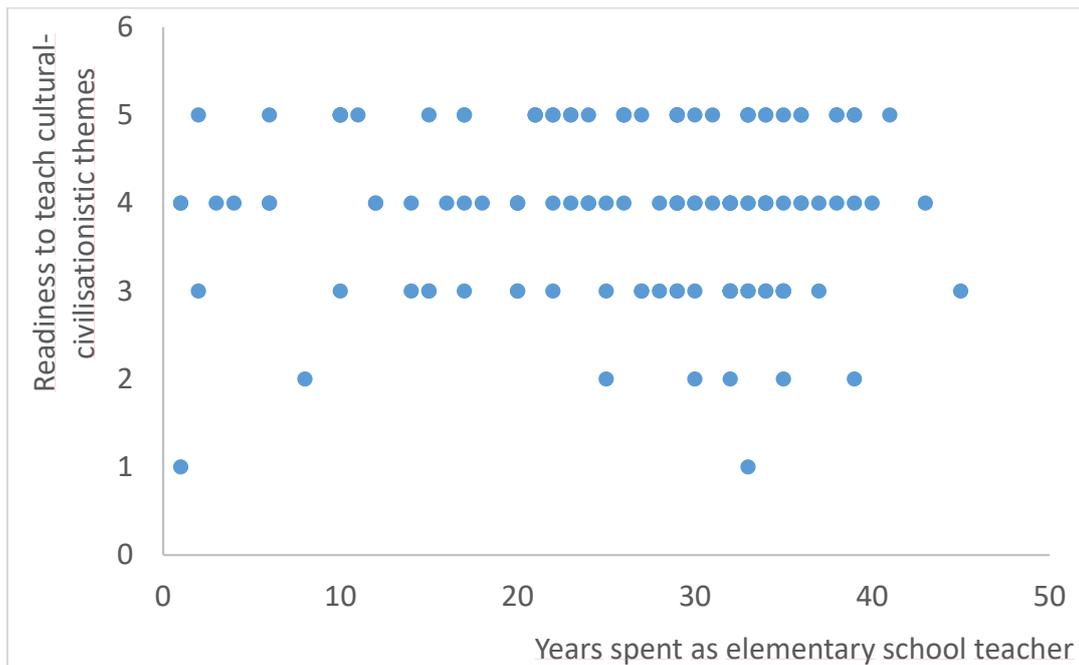


Figure 1: Connection between the assessment of methodological preparedness and the years spent in the profession

Themes processed in the classroom

Themes considered to be the most important

In one of the questionnaire items, we asked the elementary school teachers to select 5 themes of the theme list containing 14 elements which they considered the most important to be taught and processed in the classroom. Based on our results, the marked themes belonged mostly to the category related to everyday life, family and close environment, at the same time, they mentioned humanity's environment-changing activity related to the necessity of global responsibility as one of the most important classroom themes in the highest proportion (83.7%, 103 persons). The teachers' responses featured the events of family life (e.g. wedding, childbirth, etc.) among the most important themes in a significant proportion (72.4%, 89 persons). The theme of childhood, lifestyle and objects of parents, grandparents was marked by 62.6% of the respondents (77 persons), followed by everyday life and festivities (61.8%, 76 persons), and the mementos of the past in our environment (48.8%, 60 persons).

Themes processed in the classroom

In another item of the questionnaire, we asked the teachers to indicate the themes which are included in their teaching goals and they can also process them in their lessons. Our results are in line with our previous establishments related to

the social studies themes considered as the most important. Figure 2 shows the themes in the order of the proportional ratio of selection. Two of the most frequently marked themes (events of family life; childhood of parents, grandparents) are included in the National Core Curriculum, thus there is a consistency between the curriculum and teaching practice.

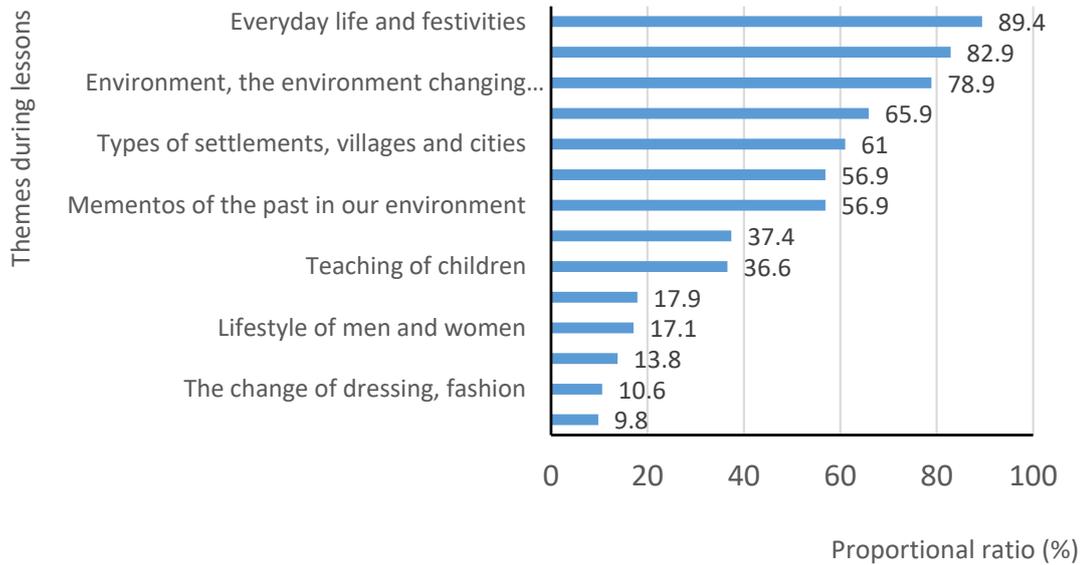


Figure 2: Reached teaching goals during the lessons

The NCC (2012) contains the theme of “Mementos of the past in our environment”, however, it does not have a prominent place in teachers’ ranking. At the same time, the responsibility for the environment and the outstanding assessment of its importance is evident (mentioning rate of 78.9%). Placing the focus on the theme of environment was presumably explained by being a less sensitive topic than, for instance, prejudices, stereotypes, and identity categories. It is possible that the teachers also feel that it is necessary to process current themes in the lessons, and environmental protection can be a neutral topic in terms of which they can do so with confidence. This assumption is somewhat supported by that the themes having a lower ranking in Figure 2 with a mentioning rate of under 50% mostly include themes which are not closely connected to the man-made artificial environment, but to responsibility and the possible sources of interpersonal conflicts.

Assessment of students’ prejudiced thinking based on teachers’ responses

We asked the elementary school teachers to indicate on a 5-point Likert Scale how much their students are characterised by prejudiced thinking holistically in the following four social areas: (1) poorness and wealthiness, (2) people living in

different places, (3) people with different workplaces and job types, and (4) other cultures and ethnic groups (Figure 3).

According to your experiences, how typical is prejudiced thinking among students in different grades related to these societal issues?

	1st grade	2nd grade	3rd grade	4th grade
Poorness and wealthiness	Please select! ▾	Please select! ▾	Please select! ▾	Please select! ▾
People living in different places (e.g. villages, towns)	Please select! ▾	Please select! ▾	Please select! ▾	Please select! ▾
People with different workplaces, job types	Please select! ▾	Please select! ▾	Please select! ▾	Please select! ▾
Other cultures, ethnic groups	Please select! ▾ Please select! I cannot judge it It is not typical at all It is not typical It is typical and not typical as well Rather typical It is really typical	Please select! ▾	Please select! ▾	Please select! ▾

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Figure 3: The screen of the teacher questionnaire studying students' prejudices (Source: own construction)

Based on our results, the elementary school teachers do not consider their students prejudiced. The mean values do not reach value 4 representing the category of "rather typical" in any case. However, it is shown that in the four areas and grades in question, the teachers identify a constant increase in the prejudice of students (Figure 4). They consider their students the least prejudiced towards people living in different types of places, while the greatest change can be found in the dimension of poorness-wealthiness. It can be interpreted as an age-related feature, i.e. as school years pass, students' attitude to others becomes increasingly adverse, and, on the other hand, similarly to perceived confidence, it is again based on teachers' subjective assessment. We do not have information about whether the teachers try methods and techniques in their work which could reduce or prevent the development of students' prejudices.

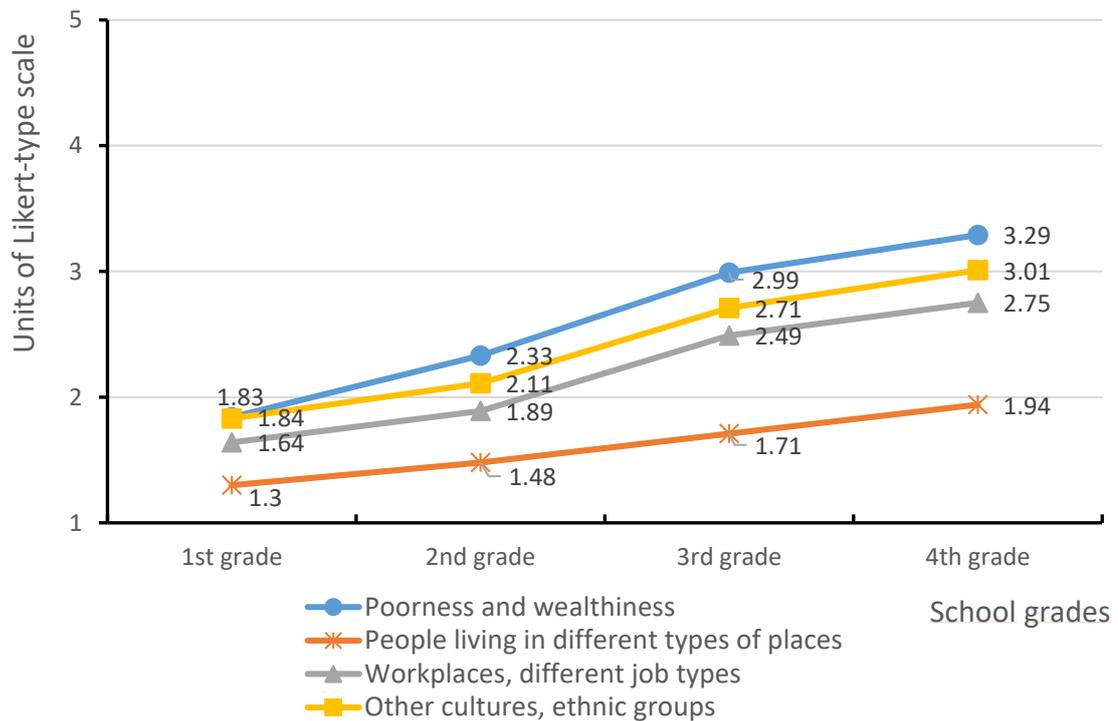


Figure 4: Teachers' assessment of prejudiced thinking in 1–4th grades

In the data analysis we found that there is a significant number of elementary school teachers (their aggregate rate is between 26% and 40% depending on the categories to be assessed) who did not give a quantifiable response. It could occur in two ways: the elementary school teachers could leave one of the 16 drop-down menus untouched and after clicking on the drop-down menu they could also select the “I cannot judge it” option. They left the response field untouched in a larger proportion compared to selecting the “I cannot judge it” option. 17.9% of the respondents (22 persons) left at least one questionnaire item unanswered in the case of beliefs about prejudice towards poorness and wealthiness, while this ratio is 18.7% (23 persons) respectively regarding people living in different types of places and workplaces, different job types, while 20.3% (25 persons) in the case of prejudices assumed towards other cultures and ethnic groups.

Within the total sample, the proportional ratio of the respondents who selected the “I cannot judge it” option after clicking on the drop-down menu is also worthy of remark. In the case of the prejudices assumed towards poorness and wealthiness 8.1% of the sample (10 persons) declined to make a decision, while this ratio was 21% (26 persons) regarding people living in different types of places, 7.3% (9 persons) for workplaces, different job types, and 6.5% (8 persons) in the case of other cultures and ethnic groups.

In a more profound analysis of the arrangement of the data on the database, we found that it is a quite frequent response pattern to have a quantified decision

only for one or two grades regarding a theme to be assessed and two or three response fields remained empty. These response patterns suggest that it is not about deliberately avoiding a response, but that the teachers did not assess the characteristics of a given grade holistically: of the four offered grades they only made a decision about their currently taught grade(s) and the assumed prejudices of the students they taught. We assumed the same intention of respondents in those cases when the respondents provided quantifiable evaluation for the themes in terms of only one or two grades, and they selected the “I cannot judge it” option in other cases. Overall, we identified one of the two response patterns for 18-20% of the elementary school teachers: in the case of the themes of poorness and wealthiness, as well as workplaces and different job types 17.9% of the respondents (22 persons respectively) made a decision about the students they taught, while this ratio was 18.7% (23 persons) in the case of other cultures and ethnic groups, and 19.5% (24 persons) regarding the assumed prejudices towards people living in different types of places. Thus, the overall proportional ratio of the respondents who avoided responding for some reasons is significantly lower, only 4% (5 persons).

Conclusions

Based on the results of our research, the elementary school teachers are aware that social studies education in the lower grades of elementary school must be implemented through processing the events of family life, the childhood of parents and grandparents and the historical examples according to the core curriculum. Among these, they identified the first area as the most important goal of the curriculum, and, at the same time, the majority of elementary school teachers regarded the other two themes to be significant as well. These results imply that the teachers try to fully comply with the requirements of the curriculum in their work.

The academic literature contains contradictory results about how prepared teachers consider themselves. The contradictory results can be explained by the different concepts of research programmes and the significant temporal differences of the conducted research studies. Based on our results, two-thirds of the teachers assessed their preparedness to be adequate to teach themes related to culture and civilisation. On the other hand, one-fourth of the respondents assessed their methodological knowledge to be uncertain, from which we can conclude that a substantial number of teachers would need methodological support. The lack of confidence about teaching social studies themes – accounted by previous research papers – is discernible, however, the confidence observed in international comparative studies is also showed in the teachers’ responses.

According to our analyses, the number of years spent in teaching profession does not influence the teachers' beliefs. This result raises further questions: what other factors influence their opinion if the experience gained over the years and the self-reflective teaching practice do not actually have any effects? Future research will need to investigate this question more profoundly and explore what factors are linked to elementary school teachers' beliefs and how the experience gained over the years is related.

The themes assessed to be the most important included global environmental protection and the events of family life, while over half of the respondents also marked the classroom activities about everyday life and festivities. The mentioned three themes have a prominent place among the actually processed themes as well. The eminent place of the development of responsibility for the environment may be explained by the neutrality of the topic: this theme may be less controversial and contradictory than other ones, thus addressing it is less risky for the teachers. On the other hand, it is another important aspect that in the past years several scientific and awareness raising forums have dealt with humans' activities of negative environmental impact and their consequences, and therefore the teachers may consider it a crucial and topical theme.

One of the goals of social studies education is the acceptance of other cultures and developing openness towards them. As in the lower grades of elementary school students primarily learn about the culture of their own nation, we studied students' openness towards social groups, while other national and ethnic cultures were also included in the questions in general terms. Our results suggest that based on the teachers' opinions, the teachers believed that the students' prejudiced attitude intensifies according to the progression of grades regarding poorness and wealthiness, as well as cultures and ethnic groups. We do not have information on how elementary school teachers try to handle this situation and what methods they use to reduce students' prejudices.

Due to the relatively low number of the sample, the generalisation and extension of the results and findings is currently not possible. We prepared a reliable online questionnaire, which would be practical to use in repeated research on a larger sample representing national elementary school teachers in order to extend the findings and conclusions.

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