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**ELEMENTS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN PRE-SCHOOL  
EDUCATION**

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**Abstract**

Cultural identity as a person's self-conception and self-perception of belonging to a distinct culture. Cultural identifiers: nationality, ethnicity, language, history, religion, and cultural arena. Cultural identity as a characteristic of the individual and of the culturally identical group of members sharing the same cultural identity. The impact of globalization upon cultural identity. The "melting pot" versus Unity in Diversity. Cosmopolitanism versus preservation of cultural identity. The Jean S. Phinney's Three-Stage Model of Ethnic Identity.

Unexamined cultural identity as a characteristics of pre-primary school age. Pre-school curriculum and cultural identity. Experiential domains as "integrated cognitive fields " The Language and Communication Domain and the opportunities to develop language identity as cultural identifier. Language as the main cultural vehicle and mark of cultural identity. Suggested activities. The Man and Society Domain - nationality, ethnicity and religion as cultural identifiers.. Activities in the Aesthetic and Creative Domain – specific cultural identifiers. The Psycho-motric Domain- opportunities to form and develop elements of cultural identity.

Cultural identifiers and the main themes of the annual programme of study: Who Am I? /Who Are We? - What and How Do I Want to Be? - How and What Do We Express What We Are Feeling with? - When, How and Why It Happens? - How Is It, Was It and Will It Be Here on Earth? - How Do We Plan / Organize an Activity?

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**Keywords:** Culture, cultural identity, cultural identifiers, experiential domains, cognitive fields, intercultural education.



## **1. Introduction. Culture and Globalization**

We all live in a global world and we are both actors and spectators in the process of international integration arising from the interchange of world views, products, ideas, and other aspects of culture. As the anthropologist E.B. Tylor (1974, p.13) defined it, culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Historically used to describe the assimilation of immigrants to the United States, the "melting pot" metaphor seems to have transgressed the North American boundaries with a devastating impact upon national and local cultures.

As opposed to this fusion of nationalities, cultures and ethnicities, the concept of Unity in Diversity (unity without uniformity and diversity without fragmentation), adopted by the European Union as an official motto, shifts focus from unity based on a mere tolerance of physical, cultural, linguistic, social, religious, political, ideological and/or psychological differences towards a more complex unity based on understanding that difference enriches human interactions. The motto means that, via the European Union, Europeans are united in working together for peace and prosperity, and that the many different cultures, traditions and languages in Europe are a positive asset for the continent.

## **2. Children's Cultural Identity in Postmodern Society**

Seen from this perspective, cultural identity as a person's self-conception and self-perception of belonging to a distinct culture seems to give prevalence to the preservation of cultural identity as opposed to cosmopolitanism. Cultural identity as characteristic of the individual and of the culturally identical group of members sharing the same cultural identity is both encouraged and supported by the European Union official policies.

The term 'culture' refers to the language, beliefs, values and norms, customs, dress, diet, roles, knowledge and skills, and all the other things that people learn that make up the 'way of life' of any society. Culture is passed on from one generation to the next through the process of socialization and enculturation. Children's culture is strongly influenced by non-formal and informal learning they are exposed to. Norms, values, attitudes and behaviors circulating in the community or society, penetrate school and fall sometimes at odds with those promoted - explicitly or implicitly - by the educational institutions. Is school able, as an institution, in the current context, characterized by diversity, globalization, alterity, dynamism, informational explosion to keep up with the society in which it exists?

Studies in this area show that there is a gap difficult to overcome between society and school: society is in the postmodern age, while school still remained in modernity. In a postmodern society, knowledge must be functional, useful; you learn not just to "know" and store certain information to demonstrate how "educated you are," but you learn to "do", "to use" what you know, "to apply" what you have accumulated in your benefit and for the benefit of the others. "Knowing what to do with what you have learned is postmodern education's major desideratum "(Vocila, 2010).

Cultural identity is about how individuals or groups see and define themselves, and how other individuals or groups see and define them. This identity is formed through the socialization process and the influence of social institutions like the family, the educational system and mass media. If people did

not have an identity, they would lack the means of identifying with or relating to their peer group, to their neighbours, to the communities they live in or to the people they come across with in their everyday lives. Cultural identity therefore 'fits' individuals into the society in which they live. The identity of individuals and groups involves both elements of personal choice and the responses and attitudes of the others. Individuals are not free to adopt any cultural identity they like, and factors like their social class, their ethnic group and their sex are likely to influence how others see them.

### 3. Teaching Culture in Pre-primary School

Can culture and cultural identity be taught? As a researcher and practitioner in the field, H. Ned Seelye has a positive, encouraging answer to this question: "The parameters of a culture-based instruction are limited only by the experiences and imagination of the teacher-guide." (1993, pp.22-23). In his book, Seelye provides ideas that can be helpful for teachers who want to enhance their students' understanding of their culture and of other culture.

Jean S. Phinney's (1990, pp.502-503) three-stage model of ethnic identity formation can be taken into consideration and used as a starting point in the analysis and implementation of the elements of cultural identity in pre-school education. The model consists of the following stages: • Stage 1: Unexamined Ethnic Identity (Diffusion-Foreclosure) • Stage 2: Ethnic Identity Search/Moratorium • Stage 3: Ethnic Identity Achievement. Stage 1: Unexamined Ethnic Identity: Individuals have not explored feelings and attitudes regarding their own ethnicity. Ethnicity is a nonissue, which leads to diffusion. The acquired attitudes about ethnicity are from parents or other adults, leading to foreclosure.

This stage is, in our opinion, characteristic for pre-primary school age, "a stage where one's cultural characteristics are taken for granted". Culture, therefore, must become an object of study, and the educator helps children to come into contact with the cultural identifiers, becoming the main knowledge facilitator. Pedagogical relationships are based upon teacher's authority; the informative function takes the primordial role in the enculturation process. Structurally, the curriculum for preschool education has the following components: the aims, the contents, and the training time for instruction and evaluation on two levels: children 3-5, and 5-6 / 7 years old. The frame objectives are formulated in general terms and they represent the competences to be developed in kindergarten in five experiential domains.

### 4. Experiential Domains as Integrated Cognitive Fields

**The Aesthetic and Creative Domain** covers the abilities to react emotionally and intellectually to perceptive experiences, sensitivity to different levels of quality manifestations, and appreciation of beauty. These experiences can be present in any curricular component, but especially in the context of those disciplines requiring personal responses, imaginative, emotional and sometimes actionable to stimuli (music, artistic activities, drama, eurhythmics etc.).

**The Man and Society Domain** includes man, his way of life, relationships with other people, relations with the social environment, as well as the ways in which human actions affect events. That is why it is estimated that preschoolers can be put into contact with this domain through the manipulation of materials and performance of activities related to practical skills, and by finding out that the materials can

also have aesthetic qualities such as texture, color or shape, etc. It is also important for preschoolers to understand that present situations are rooted in past situations, to notice similarities or differences between people or events, to imagine life in other historical periods.

It also considered that the introduction of concepts or the development of general skills should use children's personal experiences as a starting point. From this point of view, they are encouraged to engage themselves, humanly and socially, in active exploration of the area or neighborhood where they live. Their families, the physical human and social environment, can be used as learning resources. On the other hand, the literary text, images and other audio-visual materials can be used as sources of information.

**The Language and Communication Domain** covers mastering oral and written communication as well as the ability to understand verbal and written communication. By listening and expressing themselves in group situations, preschoolers become able to explore other people's experiences. They are expected to speak confidently, clearly and fluently, using appropriate means of expression for different categories of audience. The use of literary works specific to their age refines their way of thinking and their language. The best suited activities for this way of learning are: memorization of words and sentences, of songs and musical games, the use of language games. Thus, the child will be encouraged and stimulated to learn some elements of the country's and region's culture (local history, specific artistic creations meals, traditional activities etc.).

**The Sciences Domain** includes both the approach to the mathematical domain through practical experience and the understanding of nature being modified by the human beings interacting with it. The domain includes logical thinking abilities and problem solving ones, basic child's mathematical knowledge and those referring to the world and to the environment.

**The Pshycho-Motric Domain** covers coordination and control of body movements, general mobility and stamina, movement abilities and fine handling. Preschoolers are brought into contact with activities that involve body movement, competition between individuals or groups.

These experiential domains are true "integrated cognitive fields (L. Vlăsceanu, 2008, p. 9)) that transcend the boundaries between disciplines and which, in the context of this curriculum, meet the traditional areas of child's development, namely: the psycho-motric, the language, the socio-emotional, and the cognitive domain The annual programme of study includes six general themes: Who Am I? /Who Are We? - What and How Do I Want to Be? - How and What Do We Express We Are Feeling with? - When, How and Why It Happens? - How Is It, Was It and Will It Be Here on Earth? - How Do We Plan / Organize an Activity? Each of them, as well as each of the six experiential domains, offers a large range of opportunities for cultural identity education.

## 5. Cultural Identity in Pre-School Curriculum

The analysis of the pre-school curriculum from the cultural identity point of view shows the framework and referential objectives, as well as the main themes of the annual programme of study explicitly mentioning it. Thus, the Man and Society Domain with the framework objective *development of the ability to recognize, accept, and respect diversity, knowledge of some history, geography, and religious elements defining Romanian people's spiritual portrait*, and the referential objective *to describe*

*and identify specific local elements of our country and of their living area (relief characteristics, geographical location, socio-cultural, historical, religious, ethnic objectives, the Aesthetic and Creative Domain with the referential objective: to listen and to recognize fragments of national and world musical creations, appropriate to the age of preschool children and their preoccupations, and the Science Domain with the referential objective to know the elements of the social and cultural environment, placing the human element as part of the environment.*

Culture and cultural identity is explicitly referred to in the following annual themes: Who Am I? /Who Are We? *An exploration of human nature, of our beliefs and values, of the human body, of our own health status and of our families and friends, of the communities and cultures we come in contact with (material, physical, spiritual, and cultural) of our rights and our responsibilities, of what to be human. means, and How and What Do We Express We Are Feeling with? with a foray into the cultural world of the national and the universal heritage.*

Is it enough? Isn't it too general? Some will say that it is up to each professor to decide the specific didactic activities of the annual themes and of the framework and referential objective mentioned above he or she will use in order to teach cultural identity. Compared to the significance and the importance of cultural identity in the current European and international context, we strongly believe it not enough and it is too general. That is why, bearing in mind the idea that the experiential domains are "integrated cognitive fields" and each domain is to be found as part of the six annual themes, we suggest some activities referring to the following cultural identifiers: nationality, ethnicity, history, and religion, language being, as we pointed out, the binder for all of them.

## **6. Suggestions for Teaching Cultural Identifiers**

Language is, in our opinion, the most important cultural identifier, not only in the pre-school educational system, but also on all levels of formal, non-formal and informal education. Native language, as a vehicle of communication, acts as a cultural binder between individual, national, and universal values. Current European language policies support national, regional, and minority languages, thus stimulating identity awareness. Romanian language, as a mother tongue, creates an effective and an affective framework, promoting national identity and facilitating cultural communication.

The framework objectives of the Languages and Communication Domain: development of oral communication, understanding and proper use of oral structures, education of a correct verbal expression from the phonetic, lexical, and syntactic point of view, development of creativity and expressiveness of oral language and development of the capacity to understand and transmit intentions, thoughts, and meanings through written language, creates prerequisites for the formation and the promotion of the preschoolers' linguistic identity. That is why, the role of the professor becomes essential in the process of enriching children's vocabulary, and making it more flexible, of educating grammatically correct verbal communication.

Children aged 3 come to kindergarten from different familial environments, with different levels of vocabulary acquisition, some richer, some others poorer. Bringing them to an acceptable and functional use of vocabulary from the point of view of effective didactic communication is a difficult task that involves teacher's constant effort and dedication. He or she must act not only as a model, but also as

a facilitator of effective and correct communication, bearing in mind that this means not only verbal, but also non-verbal and para-verbal communication. Supporting, facilitating and encouraging each of them in this process is essential for the children's education and an important asset for their future life as beneficiaries of formal education, with primary school as the nearest horizon.

Native language as a vehicle of culture, but also as a means of socialization, is important not only for the Languages and Communication Domain, but also for each of the other five experiential domains as integrated cognitive fields. The Man and Society Domain, for example, makes use of Romanian as children's native language to put into practice its framework objectives: knowledge and compliance with the rules of behavior in society; education of the ability to relate to others; education of positive traits of willingness and character and formation of a positive attitude towards themselves and towards others, development of cooperation behaviors, prosocial and proactive (initiative), development of the ability to recognize, accept, and respect diversity, knowledge of some history, geography, and religious elements defining Romanian people's spiritual portrait, forming and strengthening practical skills specific to their motric development level, enrichment of knowledge about materials and their characteristics, as well as about necessary work techniques in order to manufacture simple products, formation of practical - household skills and use of the specific vocabulary.

Nationality is the legal relationship between a person and his or her state of origin, and causes patriotism, considered by many as an obsolete concept. Nationality, patriotism and even nationalism must be, in our opinion, very important concepts, and they deserve a special attention in pre-school education. National symbols are to be taken into consideration to support nationality: the national day, anthem, banner, and coat of arms. Activities dedicated to these symbols can be part of the annual theme Who Am I? /Who Are We? and they can be included in the Man and Society Domain, or the Aesthetic and Creative Domain. Suggested activities: *I am/we are Romanians, Our National Day, Our National Banner, My Country-Romania* (age 3-5 years old). *Proud to be Romanians, Celebrating the National Day, Romanian Banner and Coat of Arms, The National Anthem, January 24<sup>th</sup> – the Union Day* (age 5-6/7 years old)

Ethnicity, as a cultural concept, refers to a group of people who regard themselves to be different from others. The ethnic groups are united by common traditional, linguistic, ritualistic, behavioral and religious traits. The concept offers the pre-primary school professor a wide range of activities that can be included in almost all annual themes and Domains. Use of Romanian folk fairy tales, or of those belonging to Romanian authors, as contents of learning in the Language and Communication and Man and Society Domain must take into consideration that children tend to identify themselves with the positive heroes. Such heroes can be their first models of moral behaviour and a counterpart for the kind of heroes they come into contact with watching cartoons and dedicated TV channels, or playing computer games. We must admit that a competition between Romanian fair-tale heroes and "global" heroes does exist, and most of the time use of brutal force, violent behaviour, aggressiveness, and selfishness have such "global" models. When such a competition takes place, the only option is to be a part of it, if you want to offer an alternative or win it.

On the other hand, we must not barricade ourselves behind the idea of a narrow nationalism, and declare that literature for children that is not Romanian doesn't have its own value and significance. It is as we could pretend that fairy-tale authors like Hans Christian Andersen or the Grimm brothers, for

example, must not be taken into consideration. On the contrary, the models we find in their works are as valuable as the ones in the Romanian fairy-tales and they have a positive contribution to the moral education of preschoolers. In this case we already speak about intercultural education as an important part of pre-school education.

Tradition, as part of the ethnic cultural identifier, is one of the richest source of information for educational activities meant to shape children's cultural identity. Beginning with proverbs and sayings, and adding folk dances and costumes, folk songs, rituals and celebrations, each one of these can become an educational activity illustrating the theme of the present paper. Proverbs and saying, condensed expression of popular wisdom, are part of our national heritage and can be used not only as ice-breakers but also as debate themes or conclusions of the activities in the Language and Communication or Man and Society domains, mainly for the age group 5-6/7 years old.

Folk dances are also important cultural identifiers, and the sooner our children start learning them, beginning with the easiest ones for the age group 3-5 years old, and increasing the degree of difficulty for the age group 5-6/7 years old, the better for their future social life. As teen-agers and adults, they will take part in events where people dance not only "modern" dances, but also folk dances. Being able to dance them, instead of watching passively, contributes to social inclusion and shows their cultural identity. The Aesthetic and Creative Domain is the main beneficiary here, and if we add folk songs to dances we offer our children the opportunity to get into contact with another valuable cultural identifier. As long as almost everybody is complaining about the "manelization" of the present day Romanian music and dances, putting children into contact with genuine Romanian songs and dances, educating them to understand and appreciate their artistic value gives them the opportunity to decide What and How Do They Want to Be?

Religion as a cultural identifier, also plays an important role in the process of cultural identity. And we speak here not exclusively about Christian Orthodox Faith, the predominant one in Romanian society, but also about Christian values shared by the majority of our population. Religious events are part of our everyday life and they cannot be excluded from the preschoolers' cultural education. Such events can be part of the activities in the Man and Society Domain or in the Aesthetic and Creative Domain if we choose learning and singing Christmas Carols as didactic activity.

## **7. Conclusions**

There are, of course, other cultural identifiers that we could refer to. Our purpose is not to be exhaustive. What we want to accomplish is, on one hand, to suggest some activities that help educators form their children's cultural identity, and on the other hand, to draw their attention to an important, and up to date challenge of the present day Romanian society.

In the context of globalization, cultural identity cannot be simply a result of non-formal and informal learning. Formal education must be actively involved in the process of teaching culture to young generations, and pre-school education is an appropriate and fruitful starting point. Teaching culture and cultural identity is in fact a matter of state policy.

If we want to give our children a chance to accept, support, and take advantage of cultural diversity, in order to increase the mutual European and international fund of information and

development, we must, first of all, teach them who they are, what and how do they want to be, how and what do they express what they are feeling with, when, how and why something happens, and how is, was and it will be here on Earth..

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