

‘Córdoba, through Children’s Eyes’. Assessing citizenship literacy in Early Childhood Education and Special Education classes

M. A. Olivares-García^a, M. E. González-Alfaya^b, R. Mérida-Serrano^c and M. Muñoz-Moya^d

^a*Faculty of Educational Sciences. Department of Education. University of Córdoba. Córdoba, Spain. E-mail: ed1olgam@uco.es*

^b*Faculty of Educational Sciences. Department of Education. University of Córdoba. Córdoba, Spain. Corresponding author. E-mail: ed2goalm@uco.es*

^c*Faculty of Educational Sciences. Department of Education. University of Córdoba. Córdoba, Spain. E-mail: ed1meser@uco.es*

^d*Faculty of Educational Sciences. Department of Education. University of Córdoba. Córdoba, Spain. E-mail: p62mumom@uco.es*

Abstract

This dissertation assesses an innovation experience carried out by the RIECU network (Early Childhood Education Schools -Teachers’ Centre- University). The aim is to enable children to investigate the wealth of their city’s heritage through an inclusive proposal, due to the value of a paradigm of peaceful intercultural coexistence. 234 people participated: Early Childhood Education and Special Education teachers, advisers and children, as well as students and professors. The experience focused primarily on development of project to learn more about the monuments and main features of the three cultures that coexisted peacefully in the city of Córdoba. This project was assessed with the help of a mixed focus group in which all the parties involved participated. The data analysed reveal that: (1) Children explored the main features of the monument assigned and the culture to which it belongs; (2) The innovation experiences positively impacted educational inclusion processes; and (3) Children did not acquire an overall understanding of the city as a paradigm of peaceful intercultural coexistence.

Keywords: Educational City, Early Childhood Education, Special Education, Educational Innovation, Citizenship Literacy.

1. Background and principles guiding this innovation

This innovative educational project was designed, developed and evaluated by RIECU, within the framework of a larger project. Its purpose is to bring children in the second stage of Early Childhood Education (3 to 6 years old) and Special Education students closer to knowing, appreciating and recreating the historical-cultural heritage of their city.

One fundamental task in this stage of Early Childhood Education stage and for students with disabilities is to contribute to their comprehensive development. Achieving this goal requires fostering an upbringing with multiple relationships and opportunities, facilitating the construction of plural identities in which human differences and diversity are recognized and valued, through an equitable and respectful attitude. The project "Córdoba, through Children's eyes" was born from the conviction that the interaction between children in Early Childhood Education and Special Education students is a source of enrichment for both groups. The interaction between people with different abilities, talents and potentials offers an optimal experience of normalization, as well as the possibility of developing inclusive behaviours naturally and spontaneously.

To exploit the educational potential of the city – in this case, Córdoba – as a melting pot of cultural intermingling is one main goal of this research (Leiva, 2008). Another is to help the students begin to develop an identity connected to their territory, their living environment, about which they begin to learn from history lessons of peace, intercultural community and dialogue (Rodríguez, 2001). By analysing monuments belonging to the Christian, Jewish and Muslim culture, children will be able to understand that peaceful coexistence between cultures is possible. As shown in Figueras (2007, 26), “the concept of an educating city leads us to reinvent the city as a place of permanent learning, coexistence and dialogue, with the prospect of deepening democracy and strengthening liberties”. We agree with Amadini (2016) when she emphasizes the need for childhood as a time in which to take an active role in the construction of knowledge about the places in one's own city. Preparation for active citizenship includes, among other dimensions, the exercise of democratic activity in school (Camps, 2010). Such democracy permeates the everyday life of the classroom, affects the small actions that make up the daily task of education and sustains a curriculum based on the often silenced voices of children (Schultz, 2009).

Varied and extremely interesting experiences whose central core is the educational potential of the city are being developed in different areas in the international context. These projects highlight the experience of “Children are citizens”, linked to Project Zero (Harvard University) (Krechevsky, Mardell, Filippini, and Tedeschi, 2016), and the RICE (*Rete Internazionale delle Città Educative*) network in Belgium and Italy (Cadei, Deluigi, and Pourtois, 2016).

Not limited to physical description of the historical-cultural heritage, this experience focuses on the different ways of life in a “city of three cultures”. It approaches the differences, not turning them into inequalities and thus into a source of conflict, but instead conceiving them as an enrichment that generates peace and social prosperity. Learning from the past and projecting its teachings into the present is the ultimate goal of this innovative experience (Cuenca-López and López-Cruz, 2014). The project attempts to foster a critical citizenry that acts within the parameters of social justice when reflecting on migratory flows and problems provoked by cultural clashes and different territorial dominions.

The quest for knowledge starts by taking advantage of the children’s innate curiosity, following the phases of the scientific research method (Pedrinaci et al., 2012). To benefit from this curiosity, we chose the Project Approach, which offers the possibility of using educational research (Pujol, 2007; Ruiz-Torres and Mérida-Serrano, 2016) and in order to design learning environments that focus on the children’s voices (Mesquita-Pires, 2012; Rojas, Haya, and Lázaro-Visa, 2012).

2. Description of the educational innovation experience ‘Córdoba, through Children’s Eyes’

2.1. Context

The innovation experience ‘Córdoba, through Children’s Eyes’ is developing within the Early Childhood School Network RIECU, which became fully functional in academic year 2007/2008. RIECU’s purpose is to connect initial and continuous teacher training via the Project Approach. This network has initiated collaborative action-research processes in which people from three different institutions participate (School, University and Teaching Centre). Contact with excellent professionals and the professional experience shared have allowed us to act as a community of practice (Kimble, Hildreth, and Bourdon, 2008; Mérida, González, and Olivares, 2012; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002; Wesley and Buysse, 2011) based on a horizontal organization grounded in dialogic and consensual communication between teachers, advisors, teachers and students.

In RIECU, a socialized pedagogical knowledge has been constructed through agreement on the phenomenon of cooperative learning experiences. At the same time, the language and group identity established over the years have evolved from partial visions specific to each institution to a logic resulting from the exchanges and interactions experienced in the group.

This innovation is contextualized within the subjects of “Strategies of Educational Intervention” in the phase of Early Childhood Education and Practicum III, both taught in the fourth year of the Early Childhood Education degree program at the Faculty of Education Sciences (University of Córdoba).

2.2. Participants

During academic year 2015/2016, six classes—from four public kindergarten and elementary schools and one government-funded special education centre, all from the capital city and the province of Córdoba—took part in the innovation experience “Córdoba, through Children’s Eyes”. The following individuals were involved:

Table 1 near here

2.3. Objectives

- To help the children to get to know, appreciate and practice peaceful coexistence, by learning from the experiences that the history of Córdoba offers as a paradigmatic city of intercultural coexistence.
- To investigate, discover and recreate the rich heritage of the city of Córdoba from the Early Childhood Education and the Special Education student’s point of view.
- To implement educational inclusion processes in which diversity is respected and interaction between children in Early Childhood Education and Special Education encouraged.

2.4. Project phases

The innovation experience was divided into these basic phases:

(1) Preparation: RIECU assembled to plan the project, selecting the most emblematic monuments of the city, representative of the three different cultures. The monuments chosen were: *the Mosque – Muslim culture; the Synagogue – Jewish culture; the Alcázar de los Reyes*

Cristianos – Christian culture; the Viana Palace and the Roman Bridge with the Calahorra Tower.

The different monuments were distributed among the six classes involved and to each teacher participating in the project; one teacher in training was assigned.

(2) Development: When the traineeships in schools began, the children in Early Childhood Education, the teacher and the teacher trainee began to develop a project that focuses on the monument selected. The project, presented by the teacher, must gain the children's attention by introducing elements such as: (1) *a letter that arrives in the classroom; (2) a secret code that they do not know to decipher; (3) an element of surprise, such as the visit of a princess; (4) a magical dance to the sound of music; or (5) a visit to a charming palace.*

Once the children's interest is gained, their preconceptions about the topic are collected through assemblies. The Teaching Degree student audio recorded the children's statements, transcribed them and analysed their correct, erroneous and incomplete ideas. The children's provisional hypotheses were formulated with the help of these ideas, and the enquiry process begun.

In the next stage of the project, the children were asked to consider their initial ideas and to state what they wanted to know and the way they would like to study it. Their proposals were the main pillar of the research developed in the classroom. The children wanted to learn how people lived, danced, dressed and wrote at that time in the past; what they ate, what their homes and gardens were like and what they did for jobs. They want to know who characters such as Maimonides, Averroes, the Marquis of Viana and al-Ghafiqi were; what the Torah, a menorah, oil lamps, Arabic script, multifoil arches were; and what all the inscriptions you find throughout in the city mean.



Figure 1. Children's works

This is a phase of intense activity, in which the collaboration and support of the families is solicited. Through letters composed by the learners to integrate them in the knowledge acquisition process, the families were invited to contribute materials and get involved in the workshops. Some examples of the workshops, developed with families' participation, are: workshops on dancing, painting, creating characters in large dimensions, moulding clay, designing historic jewellery and geometric floors, mosaics, books on naturopathic medicine, perfumes, Arab coins, a photocall, a tourist office, etc.



Figure 2. Mother organising a stand

The large number of activities allowed the children to ascertain the truthfulness of their initial hypotheses, and to adjust them if necessary. Through observation, exploration, experimentation and contrast, the youngsters adapted their previous ideas, erase mistaken ones, verify true ones, and complete the incomplete. The process of development, from their initial hypotheses to the final ideas, was recorded in a concept map that tracked the project's overall progress and the new acquired knowledge.

(3) Exhibit: An exhibit was held to conclude this innovative educational project, in which the five educational centres came together for a day to present their assignments in form of a wall newspaper (as shown in Picture 3) and to share all of the materials developed. This session took place at the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the University of Córdoba. Each class mounted a stand to share its results, and organised a workshop about what it liked most during the project's development. All of the children circulated through the different workshops so that the other classmates could explain what they had learned.



Figure 3. Wall newspaper of the project work 'La Mezquita'

3. Project evaluation

Due to space restrictions, this study is limited to assessments by the teachers and advisers in Early Childhood Education, the professors and one Master's student.

3.1. Evaluation tools

A mixed focus group was chosen to conduct the evaluation (Gutiérrez, 2011). This method makes it possible to use qualitative research, which is more suited to the natural context in which the innovation experience developed, as well as to analyse the interpretations and concepts of the participating stakeholders. The ethics of the project were considered before and during its development, involving the different groups. In this case, an ethically democratic procedure was sought (Simons, 2011, 147), in which “a more equitable relationship is achieved between the researcher, the researched and the audiences that the research aims to inform”. A continuous flow of information between the different agents involved was thus maintained and use of data guaranteed that at no time would harm the participants.

The focus group consisted of seven teachers of Early Childhood Education, one adviser from the Teacher Training Centre, three professors and one Master's student, who performed fieldwork in one of the classes that took part in this Innovation Project. A total of 14 people from four different groups discussed “face to face” the questions presented to them by a moderator. Their contributions were transcribed and analysed.

3.2. *Hermeneutical matrix*

The technique of discourse analysis was applied (Alvarado, 2013). Several general units of analysis were instituted, derived from the established objectives—dimensions. These general units were then further specified into micro-units of analysis—categories—that emerged from the focus group participants' opinions.

Based on an interjudge agreement, a categorisation process was implemented in which the matching categories were accepted and whatever was discrepant dismissed. The dimensions and categories are subsequently related to one another, using the corresponding numerical coding, as shown below:

Table 2 near here

3.3. *Results*

The first dimension, which refers to assessment of the main objective of this educational innovation, reveals the participants' concern that the children only partially understood the concept of an intercultural city, conceived as a paradigm of coexistence. The experience focused on studying the corresponding culture of each monument in the different classes. This method provided an integrated, global view of how the three cultures contributed to a shared model of coexistence.

In the teachers' opinion, the youngest children (age 3) did not understand the study of Córdoba as a model city of peaceful tricultural coexistence:

'It is really complicated to make them understand that three cultures lived at the same time. Since the subject has never been dealt with before in class, they first have to get to know each culture separately...' (T3)

'No, the children know what the Mosque is and that it was inhabited by Muslims... but they don't know about the tricultural coexistence...' (T7)

The adviser gives her opinion:

'I think it is a very abstract concept, difficult for children to understand'. (A)

The professors in turn observe:

'(...) They have to see the coexistence, and what we have worked on are the different cultures separately. This is the first time, and they needed to know the characteristics of each culture beforehand'. (P2)

The Master's student points out that:

'They were excited about the project but very focused on their own subject, on their monument at a given moment in history only'. (S)

The second dimension focused on discovery of the city through the children's eyes. According to the different stakeholders involved, this dimension showed that the project was initiated by the teachers. By not having arisen from the children's interest, the motivation suffered a little, making it necessary to set a more managerial process in motion. The teachers had different perceptions about this matter, however:

'Since the project did not come from them, it took a lot of work. Sometimes you had to 'impose' activities'. (T2)

'At first they did not understand what it was about... But after the motivation activity they joined in and committed themselves fully to the project. They made it their own'. (T4 and T5)

The professors and the Master's student stated that the project was initially induced but that later, when the students' ideas had been collected and their questions and learning proposals considered, educational processes related to citizenship education were set in motion in a highly educational manner that respected the children's interests. It is clear that the teacher, as a qualified classroom resource, can—and sometimes must—impose possible subjects, proposals and initiatives for debate.

The third and last dimension discusses the project's inclusive potential. The different groups involved were nearly unanimous in underlining the virtue of the fact that this innovation included both (older) Special Education students and Early Childhood Education children ages 3 to 6. The monument studies empowered the learners so that they were ready to incorporate different learning rhythms in the classroom while participating in a shared session between Early Childhood Education and Special Education students. On the day of the exhibit, the

children's desire to tell and share experiences and knowledge and to explain their feelings to each other emerged. The children in Early Childhood Education explained what they had learned to the ones with special talents and vice versa. The interaction was natural, fluent and spontaneous, without any pre-set script or internalised guidelines. This makes us think that segregating behaviour towards differentiae is socially acquired and exacerbated by adult attitudes or caused by competitive learning contexts.

On this issue, the teachers stated:

'That was what I liked most about the experience... Seeing grown men like Mack trucks (refers to the Special Education students) listening to three-year-old girls explaining "the Synagogue... And when they danced Bollywood together ..."'. (T6)

The adviser and the Master's student had similar thoughts:

'I believe that this is a new experience, at least for me, and a very important one... one that must be repeated!'. (A)

'I was excited watching them... It was a values education class in its purest state...'. (S)

Finally, the professors point out:

'It was a very powerful inclusive activity... The best thing is that the learning was reciprocal and multiple... Theory in action...'. (P2 and P3)

4. Conclusions

Two types of conclusion can be inferred from evaluation of the educational innovation experience 'Córdoba, through Children's Eyes':

General conclusions:

- It is possible to conduct an innovation experience connecting initial and continuous teacher training within an Early Childhood Education school network in which stakeholders of three different institutions are involved: school – teacher training centre – university.
- The city is a first-order educational context. As simultaneously a complex system and an educationally global, permanent, plural and polyhedral agent that enables the

acquisition of a social identity built on territory, the city has important resources for comprehensive education.

- Children can learn, preserve and contribute to defining their city's identity, establishing critical and responsible dialogue adapted to their capacities. The interpretation of contemporary realities should be harmonised by using the past's best references.
- The design of inclusive, open, plural educational situations, in which students with different abilities and talents participate, makes it easier for children to understand diversities as a connatural characteristic of human beings from which they can learn and be enriched.

Specific conclusions:

- The Innovation Project 'Córdoba, through Children's Eyes' focused primarily on exploring the characteristics of the three cultures that settled in the city in the past. It is necessary to continue deepening the model of peaceful coexistence that existed among them over the centuries.
- The concept of projects or research processes in the classroom can be proposed by the children or induced by the teachers, as they are conceived as interactive and co-responsible educational processes.
- Even though the subject was introduced by the teachers, respecting the children's interest and encouraging their motivation requires that the leading role of the educational research fall to the children, beginning with the ideas, questions and activities proposed.
- 'Córdoba, through Children's Eyes' proved to be an experience with great inclusive potential, facilitating interaction between students with different abilities, and enabling spontaneous, natural and fluid interaction.

Following the project's evaluation—and given that this is the first year of its implementation—it is important to continue to reflect on the project's design in order to improve it. The need to reflect applies especially to understanding of the city as a model of peaceful coexistence, placing oneself in a real-world context, assuming duties, exercising rights and incorporating civic habits to effectively and responsibly exercise one's citizenship.

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Table 1. Participants

Institutions	Groups	Number of people
Public pre-primary and primary schools	Children	150
	Teachers	7
Government-funded special education centre	Students	43
	Teachers	22
Teacher training centre	Advisers in early childhood education	2
University	Professors	3
	Teacher trainees	7
Total		234

Source: Developed by the authors

Table 2. Hermeneutical matrix

Dimensions	Groups	Categories
1. The city as an example of peaceful intercultural coexistence	1.T. Teachers	1.T.1. Lack of student understanding
		1.T.2. Knowledge of alien cultural traits
	1.A. Adviser	1.A.1. Abstract meaning

	1.P. Professors	1.P.1. Fragmented cultural vision
	1.S. Student	1.S.1. Synchronic vision
2. Discover the city through children's eyes	2.T. Teachers	2.T.1. Secondary project
	2.A. Adviser	2.A.1. Study object of interest
	2.P. Professors	2.P.1. Citizenship education
	2.S. Student	2.S.1. Enthusiasm
3. Educational inclusion process		3.T.1. Inclusion of different rhythms
	3.T. Teachers	3.T.2. Early Childhood Education and Special Education students' interaction
	3.A. Adviser	3.A.1. Highly significant experience
	3.P. Professors	3.P.1. Reciprocal learning
	3.S. Student	3.S.1. Values education

Source: Developed by the authors