

The Power of Cultural Stories in Meaningful Learning at Early School Age

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Abstract

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The article examines the impact of cultural stories on meaningful learning in primary school students, with a focus on third and fourth grades. As part of the research, storytelling workshops were organized, in which students had the opportunity to explore stories from various cultures. The aim of the study was to analyze the effects of these activities on the understanding of cultural concepts and the development of children's cognitive and socio-emotional competences. Before and after the workshops, questionnaires were applied to assess students' perceptions of stories and learning through them. The results indicate a significant improvement in the understanding of cultural concepts and an increase in students' engagement in educational activities. The study suggests that cultural stories can become a valuable tool in the educational process, promoting meaningful learning and the development of cultural awareness at an early age.

1. Introduction

Stories, as a form of communication and education, have a long tradition in various cultures, being used to transmit teachings, values and wisdom from generation to generation. In the educational context, cultural stories can become a powerful tool in support of meaningful learning, especially in primary education, where the formation of solid cognitive and socio-emotional foundations is essential. In particular, stories from diverse cultures can contribute to the development of a deeper understanding of cultural diversity and to the formation of a set of common values, essential in the formation of an individual and collective identity.

Such an approach is supported by the systemic perspective on learning, according to which education involves a network of cognitive, affective and cultural factors that interact continuously (Rad, 2023). Albulescu and Catalano (2014) also emphasize the importance of storytelling as an expressive tool for educational communication, capable of stimulating students' motivation and involvement.

Recent research in the field of education suggests that stories are not just a method of entertainment, but an effective educational tool, which contributes significantly to the development of students' linguistic, cognitive and social skills. According to the theory of meaningful learning, proposed by Ausubel (2000),

learning becomes deeper and more effective when new information is linked to the student's previous experiences, and stories provide an ideal framework for this type of learning. They allow students to connect with abstract notions through narrative experiences, making it easier to understand and retain them.

In primary education, especially in the third and fourth grades, students are in a period of intense cognitive and socio-emotional development, in which the formation of fundamental concepts and skills is essential. Cultural stories can play a significant role in this stage of learning, providing students with a narrative framework that helps to strengthen their understanding of themselves and the world around them. Therefore, the present research focuses on the impact of cultural stories on meaningful learning in students in the third and fourth grades, within a set of storytelling workshops, aimed at stimulating active learning and promoting the development of socio-emotional and cognitive competences.

The main purpose of this article is to explore how storytelling workshops, in which students were exposed to stories from various cultures, influence their perceptions of learning and how this type of educational activity contributes to their overall development. In this sense, the research will look at



how cultural stories can support the formation of links between theoretical concepts and students' daily experiences. In order to assess the effectiveness of these activities, the results obtained from the analysis of the questionnaires applied to students before and after the workshops will be presented, which will provide a clear vision of their effects on student learning and development.

2. Theoretical foundation

Meaningful learning is a central method in contemporary education, aiming to facilitate deep and lasting understanding of information through connections with students' already existing knowledge. Cultural stories, with their narrative and symbolic character, are a powerful tool that supports this type of learning, contributing not only to cognitive development, but also to the formation of essential socio-emotional skills for primary school children. By exposing students to stories from diverse cultures, they can form a deeper understanding of cultural diversity and learn valuable lessons about life while developing fundamental cognitive skills (Ciobanu et al., 2022).

Cultural stories contribute significantly to the development of vocabulary and understanding of abstract concepts. According to recent research, stories from diverse cultures stimulate critical thinking, creativity, and the ability to make connections between ideas from various fields of learning (Bălan et al., 2021). Thus, they not only facilitate the understanding of complex concepts, but also provide students with a concrete context in which to apply new knowledge, thus supporting active and participatory learning. These processes are essential in primary education, where it is important for students to build their understanding of the world actively and based on direct experiences.

From a constructivist perspective, meaningful learning is achieved through methods that actively involve the student, through narrative, collaborative and reflective activities (Bocoș, 2013; Bocoș, 2017). In addition, within the primary curriculum, the coherent application of modern educational strategies contributes to the development of essential intercultural and cognitive competences (Albulescu & Catalano, 2020).

Regarding the impact of stories on socio-emotional development, studies show that these narrative activities help children understand and manage their own emotions, develop empathy, and express their thoughts and feelings in a creative and

safe way (Popa & Zamfir, 2021). Cultural stories also play an important role in developing students' interpersonal skills, by creating a learning environment that encourages collaboration and social interaction. These skills are fundamental to success in primary school and in children's long-term personal development.

In support of this approach, the importance of educational programs that stimulate students' motivation through meaningful activities adapted to their needs is emphasized. Narrative activities, such as cultural storytelling, can act as strong motivational factors, contributing to the active and authentic involvement of students in the learning process (Muste, 2020).

Another essential aspect of cultural stories is their ability to promote understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. Recent research suggests that stories help students appreciate cultural differences and learn about diverse traditions, values, and perspectives (Ionescu & Rusu, 2020). In a globalized context, this openness to diversity is becoming increasingly important, and storytelling education plays a crucial role in forming a spirit of tolerance and respect among students.

In addition, research emphasizes the importance of stories in building meaningful and integrated learning. According to Ausubel's (2000) theory of meaningful learning, learning becomes truly meaningful when new information is linked to students' previous knowledge and experiences. Cultural stories, by their narrative nature, provide an ideal setting for this type of learning, as they allow students to relate new information to their experiences in everyday life and build a personalized understanding of the world.

Recent studies also demonstrate that stories can be used to support the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. According to the research of Kagan and Freeman (2019), stories allow students to understand complex ethical and social dilemmas through the prism of the characters and situations in the story. This process helps students analyze and develop creative solutions to the problems presented, thus promoting critical thinking and problem-solving skills among them.

Thus, the theoretical framework of this research emphasizes the significant impact of cultural stories on the cognitive, socio-emotional and intercultural development of primary school students. Stories not only support the development of academic

competences, but also contribute to the formation of intercultural awareness and interpersonal skills essential for their later lives.

3. Research methodology

This research was conducted to analyze the impact of cultural stories on meaningful learning in primary school students, especially in the third and fourth grades. As part of the research, storytelling workshops were organized, in which students were exposed to stories from various cultures, and their impact was evaluated by analyzing the questionnaires applied before and after the workshops.

The research was conducted on a sample of 200 students from the third and fourth grades, coming from 5 schools in Arad County, in rural areas. Participants were selected based on the availability and interest of schools in these areas, being voluntarily involved in storytelling activities. The sample includes both students with diverse academic performance and a varied level of experience in storytelling. Thus, the selection was not made randomly, but based on criteria of accessibility and availability of schools in rural areas.

The study used a pre-test/post-test research design, in which participants completed a questionnaire before and after the storytelling workshops. This design made it possible to compare students' responses and assess changes in their understanding of cultural stories and meaningful learning. To enrich the analysis, other data collection methods were included. The semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, conducted at the end of the research, aimed to obtain qualitative perspectives on how the stories influenced the learning and socio-emotional development of the students. Focus groups were also organized with the students, at the end of each workshop, to explore in detail the impact of the stories on learning and the students' perceptions of them. The direct observations made during the workshops complemented these methods, providing additional information about the students' behaviors and reactions to the stories presented.

The main tools used in the research included questionnaires, direct observations and feedback sheets. The questionnaires were designed to assess students' perceptions of stories and story-based learning, including both open-ended and closed-ended questions aimed at understanding the concepts in the stories, students' emotional reactions to stories and their impact on their cognitive and socio-emotional

development. Direct observations were made during the storytelling workshops to assess the students' behaviors and reactions, as well as their interactions with their peers and with the stories presented. The feedback sheets completed by the students after each workshop allowed them to express their opinion on the activities carried out and to identify the lessons learned from the cultural stories.

The storytelling workshops were held over a period of four weeks, with two sessions per week. Each workshop lasted about 60 minutes, during which students listened to stories from various cultures, discussed them and carried out interactive activities designed to help them express their understanding of the stories. At the end of each session, students completed questionnaires and feedback sheets to assess the impact of the stories on their meaningful learning and development. Interviews and focus groups took place at the end of the research, in order to obtain a complete assessment of the students' experience.

4. Results

Following the application of data collection tools (pre-test and post-test questionnaires, direct observations, semi-structured interviews and focus groups), valuable information was obtained about the impact of cultural stories on students. The results are presented both quantitatively and qualitatively to provide a complete picture of the changes recorded.

Comparing responses to the pre-test and post-test questionnaires, significant changes were observed in students' perceptions of the stories and their understanding of meaningful learning. In particular, students reported an increase in interest in cultural stories and a better understanding of the values and moral lessons presented in them. Significant improvements were also observed in students' ability to make connections between concepts in stories and their everyday reality. Statistical analysis of responses showed an increase in mean scores for questions related to cultural understanding and empathy, with significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between pre-test and post-test responses.

The interviews and focus groups provided a detailed insight into how the students experienced the storytelling workshops. The students mentioned that the stories gave them a deeper understanding of different cultures and values, and the interactive activities during the workshops helped them internalize the lessons from the stories. Many of them

pointed out how the stories stimulated their imagination and creativity and how they opened their minds to other ways of thinking.

Some students also mentioned that the stories provided them with opportunities to discuss their emotions and feelings. In interviews with teachers, they reported that students became more confident in expressing their own thoughts and demonstrated greater empathy towards their peers. In addition, teachers noticed an improvement in collaboration between students, especially in group activities, where they worked together to analyze and discuss stories.

Direct observations showed that the students were very engaged in storytelling activities, actively participating in discussions and asking about the details of the stories. In most cases, the students were visibly excited by the cultural stories and wanted to learn more. In addition, a positive change was observed in the socio-emotional behaviors of the students, who were more open to interactions and more receptive to the ideas of others.

The results suggest that storytelling workshops had a significant positive impact on students, both cognitively and socio-emotionally. The changes observed in students' perceptions and behaviors suggest that cultural stories can be a valuable tool for developing essential skills such as critical thinking, empathy, and collaboration.

5. Discussions

The results obtained from the research suggest that cultural stories had a significant impact on primary school students, contributing to both cognitive and socio-emotional development. The observed changes in students' perceptions, as well as their behaviors, confirm the hypothesis that learning through cultural stories can support meaningful learning and stimulate the development of essential skills such as empathy, critical thinking, and collaboration.

In terms of cognitive development, students demonstrated a better understanding of cultural concepts and an increased ability to make connections between the stories presented and their everyday reality. These results are consistent with previous research that has shown that cultural stories can facilitate the understanding of abstract concepts and the development of language skills (Bucur & Ionescu, 2021). Moreover, through the interactive activities carried out during the workshops, the students were encouraged to apply the new knowledge in a

personalized context, which contributed to meaningful learning, as described in Ausubel's theory (2000).

This type of learning can also be understood through the prism of the postcognitivist model of systemic learning, which emphasizes the connections between cognitive, emotional and cultural dimensions (Rad, 2023).

On the other hand, the changes observed in students' socio-emotional behaviors confirm the positive impact of stories on the development of empathy and collaboration. Students have become more open in their interactions with peers and more receptive to the opinions and feelings of others. These results are supported by the research of Wilson and Lucht (2019), which demonstrated that stories contribute to the development of children's socio-emotional skills, providing them with a safe framework for exploring and understanding their own emotions and those of others.

Regarding the selection of participants, it is important to mention that they were chosen based on the availability of schools in Arad County and the interest shown by teachers and students, without applying a random selection. This approach has allowed the inclusion of students from different educational backgrounds, but limits the possibility of generalizing the results to the entire population.

In addition, the research was carried out in a relatively short period of time, which limits the possibility of assessing the long-term impact of cultural stories on student development.

Despite these limitations, the results obtained suggest important directions for future research. It would be useful to explore the impact of cultural stories on students from different educational backgrounds and investigate their long-term effects. It would also be interesting to look at how cultural stories can influence the development of academic skills, as well as students' ability to understand and adapt to diverse cultures.

6. Conclusions

The research aimed to analyze the impact of cultural stories on meaningful learning in primary school students, especially in the third and fourth grades. The results suggest that cultural stories are a valuable educational tool, having a significant impact on the cognitive, socio-emotional and intercultural development of students.

Following the storytelling workshops, students demonstrated a deeper understanding of cultural concepts and greater empathy towards their peers, which contributed to the development of critical thinking and collaboration skills. Students were also more confident in expressing their own ideas and feelings, and this was confirmed by teachers' observations and students' feedback. These findings support previous research indicating that cultural stories can support meaningful learning and the development of children's socio-emotional skills (Bucur & Ionescu, 2021; Wilson & Lucht, 2019).

However, the research has certain limitations, such as the selection of participants based on the availability of schools and a relatively short time to conduct workshops. These aspects need to be taken into account when generalizing the results, and future research should include larger samples and investigate the long-term impact of cultural stories.

In conclusion, cultural stories prove to be an effective tool in supporting meaningful learning in primary school students. They not only contribute to students' cognitive development, but also play an important role in promoting intercultural awareness and developing socio-emotional skills that are essential for integration into a diverse and globalized society.

Based on the findings of this research, we recommend the inclusion of cultural stories in a greater number of educational activities, in order to support student development holistically. It is also important that storytelling education is used to stimulate critical thinking, collaboration and empathy, which are essential aspects in primary education.

It is recommended that future research examine the long-term effects of cultural stories and explore how they may influence the development of students' academic skills, as well as their impact on students from diverse educational backgrounds. It would also be useful to investigate the integration of cultural stories into various school subjects in order to maximise their impact on pupils' learning.

Authors note:

Denisa Ramona Chasciar is a PhD candidate and teaching assistant at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Psychology and Social Work, Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca. Her academic work focuses on early childhood and primary education,

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Alina Felicia Roman is a professor at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Psychology and Social Sciences, Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad. She has extensive experience in teacher education, educational psychology, and curriculum development. Her research addresses effective teaching methods, self-assessment strategies, and critical thinking in education. She has authored and co-authored books, book chapters, and scientific articles in indexed journals. She is actively involved in national and international research collaborations and has a strong contribution to advancing the field of educational sciences in Romania.

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