The role of "Children's University" in the development of media competence in primary school students

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Abstract. The Polish education system does not offer a separate school subject dedicated to media competence. Media education is adopted within the curricula of various subjects and extracurricular activities. For many years, the system has been criticised by media education experts and perceived as requiring change. Skills related to the use of modern technologies can also be acquired outside of school with the support of other institutions, such as higher education facilities. One example may be Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce which has addressed the needs of school children for several years by conducting classes within the framework of Jan Kochanowski Children's University. The present paper analysed the opportunities created by this type of educational programme and evaluated its effectiveness in terms of complementing school education. The data gathered from the survey, addressed to both participants (school age children) and their parents, was subjected to qualitative and quantitative analysis. The survey's results reveal that the classes dedicated to the use of modern technologies within the framework of Children's University play a significant role in improving the students' media competence. Both the children and their parents point out to gaining new knowledge and skills related to the use of communication and information technologies. Furthermore, the classes encourage students to develop a critical attitude toward problems arising from the use of digital media.
Keywords: media education, media competence, extracurricular activities.

1 Introduction

Modern people must capably navigate the world of digital media. Hence, it is necessary to equip them with suitable competencies as, without the ability to use digital media, they cannot fully benefit from many conveniences of life. Making use of its benefits enables us to perform everyday tasks faster, cheaper, more comfortably and more effectively. However, users should have well developed digital competencies if they want to take

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advantage of this opportunity to work more efficiently. If one considers this, the need of lifelong media education is vital, with its habits developed during the early school period and cemented in the following years. Information technologies have become an integral part of family life [1, 2]. In a world where media is of such great importance, children and youth need to acquire media competence, especially since they are the most frequent users of modern communication and information technologies.

2 Methods

Media competence is a key concept in the field of media literacy and media education [3]. As defined by UNESCO, media and information literacy is a "set of competencies that empowers citizens to access, retrieve, understand, evaluate and use, create as well as share information and media content in all formats, using various tools, in a critical, ethical, and effective way, in order to participate and engage in personal, professional, and societal activities" [4, p. 17].

As in many other countries of the European Union [5, 6], media education does not function as a school subject in general education in Poland. This solution is adopted in the two last Regulations of the Minister of National Education, where media education is not referred to as a separate subject.

The Decrees of the Minister of Education from 17 June 2016 [7] and 14 February 2017 [8] indicate that it is possible to organise education within this scope while simultaneously accomplishing aspects of the curriculum of various subjects. In the current curriculum, media education is implemented at each stage of education from preschool to secondary education. The curriculum puts an emphasis on skills and competencies which enable the learner to actively participate in the information society and to become a life-long learner. Elements of media education do not constitute a separate didactic unit; instead, they appear in a more or less specified form in the curricula of various subjects. The difficulty results from the fact that most educational aims do not directly call for implementing media education and providing students with media competencies. Nevertheless, it is necessary to utilize information and communication technology in educating children [9, p. 19; 10].

The curriculum determines the range of the teacher's work. However, it is created in such a manner that it often indicates only generally the necessity of using media and encourages reflection on the use of technology with the possibility for teachers only to freely interpret the recommendations. Thus, teachers could marginalise the suggestions in the curriculum and implement its recommendations in a limited way, or even completely disregard them. This situation can also be caused by psychological factors, such as teachers' unwillingness to incorporate new technologies in the classroom. This is why the aforementioned approach to media education is frequently criticised [11, pp. 95-96]. Effective media education requires that teachers have sufficient media literacy competencies [12, 13] as well as the competencies to promote media literacy in students [14, 15].

Media education may be also realised via extracurricular activities. They are addressed to all children who want to broaden their knowledge of the world. The subject area varies depending on the type of scientific circle and is fully adjusted to the students' age. All teachers are encouraged to design a lesson which cannot be considered as "conventional": they take students on trips, carry out numerous experiments, organise meetings with interesting people, or try to conduct classes in a new environment using various methods.

Primary schools offer numerous extracurricular activities, including Maths, Native Language, Art and Science. Thus, children can sign up for the activities which suit their interests most and, in consequence, develop their passions.

If a student wants to participate in extracurricular activities, he or she should have such possibility. It is worth mentioning that this type of school activities is free of charge. However, students sometimes do not want to participate in extracurricular activities organised by the same teacher who conducts regular classes and they prefer to work with another person in a group of new children. In such cases, students may develop their passions during extracurricular activities organised by universities. A good example is Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce which has adjusted its educational offer to the needs of students and has organised classes within the framework of Jan Kochanowski Children's University for several years.

The mission of Jan Kochanowski Children's University in Kielce is to support the intellectual, emotional and axiological development of 7–14 year old children through activities that stimulate creative thinking, describing and interpreting the world of nature and culture as well as to encourage children to develop their interests and scientific passions. The project is based on the theory of multiple intelligences formulated by H. Gardner [16] and its aim is to reveal the intellectual potential of children deepening on their cognitive preferences.

Owing to the creative contact with science and culture, the use of modern and active training in providing children with scientific knowledge, and the interpretation of important empirical and cultural issues, children have the opportunity to broaden their knowledge and gain information which is not covered in the core curriculum. Moreover, children have a chance to explore the university, its lecture halls, laboratories and other places which are reserved to use only for adults and students, where children are not allowed to enter and which, according to children, belong only to the world of adults engaged in difficult scientific activities. The extracurricular activities organised by Jan Kochanowski Children's University are divided into lectures and workshops and are realised within the frameworks of following modules:

1. Man and Nature
2. Man and Culture
3. Man and Modern Technologies
4. Man and Society

Students participating in the module "Man and Modern Technologies" attend classes that cover the following topics: "New Media From a Different Angle, or What Can Smartphones, Tablets, Computers and Consoles Do", "In Two Worlds…", "Online and Digital Games Versus Reality", "Could Modern Science Exist Without Information Technologies?", "How to Cooperate Online?", "Word, Image and Sound, and Their Processing in the Virtual Space", "Gadgets of the Future".

Each participant completes 32 hours of workshops and 8 hours of lectures. The classes are held once a month on Sundays. In the academic year 2019/2020, Children's University's classes were attended by over 300 participants.

3 Results

In order to study the effectiveness of the Children's University education programme, a survey was conducted among children and their parents. The questions addressed issues related to the completion of the module "Man and Modern Technologies" in terms of the improvement of the participants' media competence.

All of the respondents declared that the classes under the module "Man and New Technologies" contributed, to a lesser or greater degree, to the improvement of their media competence (Table 1).

Table 1. Survey results.

Did your digital media knowledge and skills improve after completing the module "Man and Modern Technologies"?	%
Yes, considerably	64
Yes, slightly	36
No	-

The respondents were asked to justify their answers and assess the Children's University module in comparison with regular school classes. A significant number of respondents pointed out to the module's attractiveness, more interesting curriculum and less stressful learning environment. The responses included the following: "the classes were relevant with my interests and more engaging than the ones at school", "playing on smartphones made us forget that we were in class; this is a school I could attend", "the classes showed me that I could learn by playing on my smartphone, something I have never done before," "finally, classes where using your smartphone is not forbidden", "I happened to learn through playing on my smartphone at school once, but I found these classes more entertaining and the questions easier."

The majority of parents gave a positive response to the module "Man and Modern Technologies" with regard to the development of media competence in children. Based on interviewing children and observing their behaviour, parents expressed opinions such as the following: "knowledge transmitted during the lecture 'Gadgets of the Future' on the one hand encouraged reflection on the opportunities brought by the rapid development of digital technologies, whereas on the other hand prompted our children to think about the purposefulness of certain 'inventions'"; "after technology-aided classes, we would play quizzes at home, and it still was not enough for our daughter."

The above responses point out to the classes' contribution to the participants acquiring new digital media-related skills and developing reflective and critical thinking.

4 Conclusion

Classes organised as part of Children's University greatly complements standard school education. The activities within the framework of the programme give the students the opportunity for creative contact with science and culture. Modern and engaging manner of knowledge transmission, along with multi-aspect interpretation of important empirical and cultural issues enable children to gain knowledge of aspects that are not included in school curricula.

Participation in the module "Man and Modern Technologies" contributes to the enhancement of digital media-related knowledge and skills, which translates into the improvement of the children's media competence.

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