



PRIMARY EDUCATION TEACHERS' VIEWS ON THE ROLE OF MUSEUM EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN THE LEARNING PROCESS

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the role that museum educational programs play in the educational process. In particular, the contribution of discovery learning and museum experience to the formation of students' personalities is studied, with a view to the functioning of the school at a cognitive and social level. The research shows that teachers recognize the benefits of educational visits to museums and seek to offer their students a differentiated learning environment. However, they also point out the inhibiting factors that prevent them from integrating museum educational activities into their program, although they recognize that the museum space is a valuable learning resource.

Keywords: museum, museum exhibits, museum educational activities, museum educational programs, museum pedagogy, school extroversion, cultural identity

1. Introduction

The term “learning” is interpreted as the acquisition of knowledge (Bambiniotis, 2019). According to Kapsalis (2006), “learning” is the process that leads to a permanent change in an individual’s behavior and arises as a result of experience or exercise. Learning, as a generative factor of a change in an individual’s behavior, is differentiated from other causes, such as biological maturation or fatigue. By extension, it may be the result of an organized educational process, but may also derive exclusively from individual experience. Learning brings about a change in the individual’s behavior that is not

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permanent, but has a relatively permanent character. In addition, its results are observable and recordable (Lightfoot, 2014).

For Xochellis (2018), learning is *“the process by which the child and adolescent, through their own activity, acquire knowledge, skills and abilities that help in their own personal development and integration into the environment”*. According to Hatzidimou (2015), learning is considered *“the acquisition of knowledge, abilities, skills, the appropriation and processing of information, through which a change in human behavior occurs”* and is distinguished into natural and school-based learning. The first is unplanned and random in nature and takes place in the broader environment of each individual. On the contrary, the second is planned in nature and is implemented in the school environment, where the learner acquires knowledge, skills and shapes the particular characteristics of his personality.

Learning is directly linked to teaching (Kogoulis, 2012). According to the perceptions of experts in the field of Educational Psychology (Kapsalis, 2006), the student is not a passive receiver who reacts mechanically and without participation to environmental stimuli. On the contrary, he functions as an active entity, a transformer of the information data offered by the teacher-transmitter. The learning achieved by the student is a living product, which the student utilizes to satisfy his needs, solve his problems and provide answers to the questions that concern him.

Although Behaviorism is still a dominant learning theory today, a new theory is emerging in America that focuses on the fact that the student is capable of constructing knowledge on his own through understanding reality, experiences and actions (Elliot & Murayama, 2008; Lightfoot, 2014). In Social Constructivism, as advocated by Vygotsky, the individual has in his learning quiver a series of tools that will help him to master learning. The individual, through self-activity, constructs meanings and constructs *“conceptual systems”* driven by strong internal motivations. His association with other individuals in the same learning environment promotes interaction. For Filippoupolitis (2015), the difference between behaviorism and constructivism lies in the fact that in the former learning is quantitative, while in the latter it is qualitative, as the mindful subject gathers concepts and produces meanings. Finally, according to Bruner's theory, humans react to the environment in order to explore it. In the two-part process that follows, they initially form images by recruiting pre-existing categories and then form concepts through analytical and intuitive thinking (Elliot & Murayama, 2008). The educational system must encourage students to use information and acquired knowledge to solve problems under different conditions. The approach to knowledge and the acquisition of new skills is achieved through experimentation and practical training (Sfyroera, 2002).

2. The extroversion of the school in cultivating students' critical and historical thinking

According to the systemic viewⁱⁱ, in which many scientists include it, the school unit, through the interaction between its members, aims at the development of students. A key element for this development is change. In order to integrate change into the evolutionary path of students, a two-way influence relationship is necessary that will create positions, contrasts, and compositions, with which this development will be achieved. According to Hatzidimou and Anagnostopoulou (2015), the school integrates the student into groups, so that it can lead him to the development of skills, attitudes and behaviors that will enable him to coexist and cooperate, without losing his identity, while developing a critical attitude towards the stimuli and information he receives.

The teacher seeks to develop students' constructive thinking through discussions on topics that interest them. By recognizing weaknesses and errors and drawing arguments from other members of the group, students come into contact with different ways of thinking (Kanavouras, 2006). Kapriniotis (2006) argues that students question and reexamine not only the information they receive, but also what they themselves previously considered given, developing a critical attitude towards things. By understanding the differentiation of conceptual meanings and the plurality of positions and opinions on each topic, they develop one of the main characteristics of the functioning of the human intellect, critical thinking.

As specified in Government Gazette 167/A/30-09-1985, the development of critical and creative thinking is among the main objectives of primary and secondary education. Specifically, according to Law 1566/85, Article 1 states that *"the purpose of primary and secondary education is to contribute to the all-round, harmonious and balanced development of the intellectual and psychosomatic powers of students, so that, regardless of gender and origin, they have the opportunity to develop into complete personalities and live creatively"*. More specifically, paragraph c of the same article states that education contributes so that students *"develop creative and critical thinking and a perception of collective effort and cooperation, so that they take initiatives and, with their responsible participation, contribute decisively to the progress of society as a whole and to the development of our homeland"*.

Historical thinking is related to the ability to read a testimony or an object and interpret it in such a way that we have the ability to use it as a historical document. The document ensures the possibility of providing answers to historical questions. Therefore, in order to develop children's historical thinking, it is necessary to provoke questions, motivated by contact with authentic documents (Makrygianni & Fokaidou-Papamarkou, 2011).

The teacher must, with his knowledge and attitude, contribute to the cultivation of students' historical thinking and their development as critically thinking citizens. To achieve this, he takes advantage of every opportunity, as an important tool, to utilize the

ⁱⁱ The general systems theory of Ludvig Von Bertalanfly, starting in 1940, studies the relationships of the members of a system; It is a holistic view of the interdependence between the members. The school is a system of students, teaching and support staff, management, families of students and the relationships and interactions between them are examined and evaluated according to the systems theory (Giotsa, 2014).

use of culture during the educational process (Mavropoulou – Tsioumi, 2010). In addition to academic learning, his attitude and behavior also affect the socialization of students (Bikos, 2011).

Regarding culture, the teacher acts as a facilitator in the students' effort to see, reflect on and evaluate works of art. When they understand the cultural value of museum exhibits, they are able to feel the cultural heritage and utilize it as a tool in their lives, in order to preserve/maintain their cultural identity (Mavropoulou-Tsioumi, 2010). It is true that in order for the teacher to be able not only to accompany the students but also to implement a museum program themselves, he or she needs the necessary training. In this direction, several museums provide teachers with supporting material for the preparation of the visit to their space. However, they are not satisfied with this. For example, the Acropolis Museum, the Benaki Museum and several regional museums, such as the Nikos Kazantzakis Museum, offer teachers, in addition to supporting material, seminars and valuable educational tours.

3. The contribution of museum educational activities to the educational process

One of the reasons for conducting educational programs in museums is to enable students to be guided in the construction of mental schemas through dialogue, questions, discussions and reflections. The purpose of visiting a museum is to produce new knowledge through experiences, which are, however, connected to those already existing (Vafiadou & Dinou, 2017).

In the museum space, the student has the opportunity to use the exhibits by relating them to his personal experiences and experiences. Essentially, museum objects have the role of models and function as springboards for knowledge. It is a fact that interactive environments contribute decisively to the creation of new knowledge, which entails activities with assisted discovery, problem solving and, of course, symbolic play (Filippoupolitis, 2015).

In the environment of a museum, the student goes from being a simple visitor to a little explorer. Modern educational programs in museums, such as "hidden treasure" games, are interactive in nature. Indicatively, museums that choose to act according to discovery learning (Koliadis, 2007; Schunk, 2010) are Natural History and Science Museums, where interactive exhibits are implemented. For such an exhibit to be considered successful, it must focus on experience. This means that it awakens pre-existing knowledge, with which the student comes equipped. It also has a multi-sensory nature, and the knowledge and information that the student receives is a product of his own choice. A key parameter is prior guidance, because this learning does not thrive in all environments (Nikonanou, 2015).

The concept originating from the United States of America that the museum favors the student's perspective and needs makes the museum a privileged place for the transfer of knowledge. Its space is presented as ideal to help the teacher apply experiential learning and reap its significant benefits. Students approach and acquire knowledge empirically, within authentic environments. From being inaccessible, collections become

tools of knowledge through a playful and personalized contact with the young audience. Today, thanks to museum pedagogy, the child continues to be the main category of the audience, towards which the pedagogical objectives of each museum are aimed.

Museum educational programs do not aim at teaching specific cognitive subjects, nor do they seek to reproduce the knowledge of students. On the contrary, they seek to encourage exploration, discovery and experimentation with activities that relieve students and free them from performance anxiety in an environment that is attractive to children (Dirogianni, 2011). It is worth noting that the museum encourages voluntary learning. For this reason, the combination of museum pedagogy with leisure pedagogy is essential, so that students do not lose their interest in the museum. As Nikonanou (2015) emphasizes, the elements that must be maintained during educational visits are flexibility in the allocation of time, freedom of choice, the ability to engage in activities according to interests and release from performance anxiety. Consequently, school groups that will make educational use of the museum will achieve the learning objectives of the visit and, at the same time, will be entertained, create and acquire new skills. In the museum, students actively participate, observe, express themselves freely, think critically and engage with all their senses in a process of reading, interpreting, decoding and using objects. In the role of explorer, they experiment and are led to learn through the stimuli and experiences it offers them (Vafiadou & Dinou, 2017).

The flexibility of museum programs offers the advantage of change, evolution and redesign, depending on the audience they are addressed to. Students are encouraged to wonder and are invited to explore in order to discover. The objects come to life and invite students to process and interact with them (Skandali, 2010).

Since the first educational programs of museums in Greece, which began in the 1970s, significant changes have been made towards their improvement and modernization. Today, the majority of Greek museums have educational departments and organize seminars and conferences to promote cultural education in schools (Magaliou & Perakaki, 2018). It is worth mentioning the Greek Children's Museum in Athens, which, with exhibits such as "The Attic" and "The Kitchen", seeks to familiarize children with the everyday life of today and yesterday. Furthermore, communication between young and old is encouraged, and the generation gap is bridged. Also, collections such as "The World Around Man" and "Man and His Body" give us the impetus to come into contact with the natural environment in which we live and to discover ourselves and the people around us. Another notable example of a museum with intense educational activity is the Historical Museum of Crete. The educational programs it offers, designed according to the age and cognitive characteristics of the students they are addressing, aim to introduce children to various aspects of the history of the "Great Castle", "Chandaka" or, as we all know it today, Heraklion. In this way, children learn about various aspects of the culture of Crete, the history of the inhabitants and the life of the Cretan countryside until the mid-20th century.

4. Research methodology

The purpose of this specific research was to investigate the views of primary school teachers on the role and contribution of museum education programs in the educational process. In order to carry out this study, it was deemed necessary to conduct a qualitative study, which would highlight the views of teachers based on their personal experience and practice (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). The semi-structured interview (Iosifidis, 2003) was chosen as the data collection tool, which included questions regarding how often students visit museums during a school year and the reasons for doing so, the way in which students approach museum visits and whether their attitude is linked to their school performance, the benefits that arise from the implementation of museum education programs and, finally, the factors that discourage a teacher from integrating museum activities into the educational process.

The research sample consisted of ten teachers (six women and four men), who were serving in primary schools in the prefecture of Evros during the period of the research. The collection of research material took place in April 2022. All interviews were audio-recorded after obtaining the consent of the interviewees. Each interview lasted approximately twenty-five minutes and served as a starting point for the extraction of the relevant findings.

The research data were processed using the structuring technique (Bonidis, 2004), in order to highlight and analyze specific points of the research material, according to defined criteria. This was followed by a descriptive recording of what the interviewees said, excerpts of which are listed below.

4.1 Presentation of findings

Regarding the frequency of school visits to museums, the teachers, as a whole, stated that they visit the museums of the city where they work as often as possible. From their responses to the survey, we read: (D. B.) *"I visit the city's museums often, because, let's not forget that we live in a city that does not have a large number of museums, and it is not easy to find the ones that exist in large cities. So, these museums that exist in Alexandroupolis, I make sure to visit them... once will be for sure. If there is a possibility, we will visit them a second time, maybe a third time, if possible"*. One teacher (A. P.) commented: *"From one to two times, maybe three. The city does not have very many museums, but the ones it does have, we visit all of them. "I make it a point to visit all four museums in the city in the two years I've been in charge of the class"*.

The teachers who participated in the research describe the students' response to museum-educational activities as positive, without, however, considering that their attitude is linked to their school performance. From their answers, we read: (A. P.) *"In general, they like it very much. They like these visits. In fact, I make sure that we implement an educational program every time, not just go and visit the museum... and in cases where there is no educational program, I make it myself"*. One teacher (H. P.) argued: *"There are definitely all kinds of reactions. I want to say that there are some children who like it or who will find, although they did not expect it, some interest in this visit. However, there are also those who will see it as*

an opportunity for an excursion and perhaps will not give it the due importance. But my experience so far shows that children are usually impressed, especially when they come into contact with something they have not seen before, with something new". One teacher (H. S.) commented: "Oh, they are so happy! Maybe because they know, from previous times, that we will not just go and look at some exhibits and leave, but we will do things in the museum, that is, we will listen, observe, discuss, play, and even cook, it has happened..."

Regarding the benefits that students derive from the programs and actions implemented in museums, teachers recognize that these are many and long-term. Many focus on the opportunity given to students for experiential learning and emphasize the possibility of developing critical thinking, teamwork and solidarity that is developed through these actions. They also refer to the effectiveness of the informal form of education provided by museums, which contributes to the cognitive, social and psycho-emotional development of students. From the responses of the participants in the survey, we read: (D. B.) *"There are many benefits that they will derive. And these benefits, I think, are seen as the years go by, not immediately"*. One teacher (H. P.) said: *"The benefits are many. Usually there are more when there is an interactive part, because students take part in it and can thus develop their critical view, learn new things, come into contact with cultures, see what was happening in their place or in other places and countries in the past, come into contact with cultural heritage in general"*. One teacher (A. K.) emphasized emphatically: *"Obviously the benefits are not measurable. In my opinion, education does not have this character. That is, doing something one day and being able to measure it, as a benefit the next. So, using time as a criterion, the benefits that a student derives may not be immediately visible, but their life, their path, their adult life, are obviously affected"*. One teacher (H. S.) pointed out: *"The benefits are certainly very many! Initially, they realize that they are all a team. They collaborate, communicate, help each other and share something they discovered. This is very important for their socialization. They learn how to behave in a space outside of school with specific rules, to take on roles. I would say that they forget that at that time there is a lesson in the sense of the typical school process, but they learn in an experiential way much more than they would learn by reading information in a book. Especially in the area of history and tradition, it is, perhaps, the most appropriate way for them to love their place and get to know their past"*.

Regarding the factors that discourage a teacher from participating in museum education programs, most of those who participated in the research focus on teachers' ignorance of the value of museum education in the learning process and the time-consuming preparation required for out-of-school activities. They even argue that in primary education, the curriculum is extensive, the time frames are short and specific, and thus teachers do not dare to deviate from their program. In addition, the financial burden of transportation and the responsibility for the safety of students discourage them from such activities. From their responses to the research we read: (A. K.) *"For me, the focus that the Greek school has on the cognitive part is to blame. That is, to put it differently, the material that must be completed. The school is structured in such a way that there are too many lessons, which do not fit into the hours set by the State. So, teachers are racing to catch up"*. One teacher (D. B.) said: *"I think that in some cases the teachers themselves are to blame for not understanding the importance of these programs. That is, they have somehow not understood,*

through their basic education, the importance of museum education. Besides, this subject, namely museum education, was not taught in all the Pedagogical Departments or Pedagogical Academies that the teachers who are currently in practice and have 30 years of service graduated from". One teacher (E. X.) argued: "I believe that the inhibiting factors are the great deal of preparation required on their part and the time constraints. It is like designing a new lesson, outside of class, for which you have to be very well prepared so that you can then find ways to spark the interest of the students". One teacher (D. A.) stated: "The most important factor is the pressure of the material; when there is a lot of material that needs to be completed".

5. Findings

Most teachers stated that they aim to visit museums at least twice during the school year. As they stated, the reasons for doing so are mainly the socialization of students and their desire to diversify the learning environment, in order to attract students' interest and mobilize their active participation in an experiential framework of action. According to Davies *et al.* (2013), museums and other art and culture spaces are considered factors that enhance students' creativity and are characterized as creative learning environments.

A large number of educators recognize the museum environment as a valuable learning resource. A similar view is expressed by Merriman and Swain (1999), citing the example of the Croydon Museum in London and several museums in Glasgow, which created the new Open Museum. In collaboration with schools, they offered their audience a new museum experience of education and entertainment. Seeking a revision of their role, museums, from transmitters of information to a passive audience, are transformed into forums for consultation and interaction. Zaharatou (2015) characterizes museums, and especially local history museums, such as the Historical Museum of Crete, as places of research and understanding of the cognitive object of History. Using educational programs as a tool, local museums are centers of education and entertainment and seek to introduce students to the epistemological study of history using material evidence from the past. Additionally, Skotida and Rogakou (2015), on the occasion of the Greek Children's Museum, emphasize that museum-pedagogical programs aim to raise students' awareness of contemporary art, to understand themselves and the world around them, to realize the correlation of socio-political conditions with every form of art and to encourage students' expression in relation to issues that concern contemporary society.

When asked about the benefits that students derive from activities in museum environments, teachers mentioned many and varied ones. More specifically, they pointed out the socialization of students, the development of skills, the change of attitude towards history and culture, and the cultivation of creative and critical thinking. The development of these skills is also agreed upon by Farstad and Aarsand (2021), who argue that the interaction between adults and students during educational activities in places outside of school, such as museums, significantly helps in this direction. The creation of broader social relationships and the variety of practices applied during the educational process contribute to teaching and learning.

Teachers have commented positively on the high effectiveness of experiential learning. Davies *et al.* (2013) argue that experiential learning in non-school settings, such as museums, combined with play-based learning, promotes students' creative skills, allowing them to work at their own pace and without pressure. For Foreman-Peck and Travers (2013), learning in a museum enhances knowledge acquisition, cultivates skills and brings enjoyment to the educational process. The learning experience in a creative environment, such as a museum, inspires, motivates and enhances the cultivation of metacognitive and critical skills. Skotis and Rogakou (2015) present, as a basic principle of the philosophy of the Children's Museum's educational programs the Chinese proverb, according to which, it is much more useful to teach a child to fish than to give him fish. Its programs are designed according to the needs of students and apply experiential learning so that students cultivate multiple skills, utilizing all the senses.

It is noteworthy that one teacher pointed out the long-term benefits of the educational process. According to a study by Davies *et al.* (2013), carefully planned collaboration between schools and businesses and arts and culture organizations in the local community contributes significantly to the development of skills in students. It is crucial for the creation of knowledge with a long-term impact.

One of the main deterrents for teachers to integrate museum education programs into the educational process is, according to the respondents, the large amount of material they are asked to cover in a short time frame, as well as the fact that they feel somewhat insecure. As Kouveli (2001) states, although student visits to museums are within the school's responsibilities to help students get to know the museum and create a meaningful relationship with it, the state not only does not implement an educational policy that strengthens museum education, but tends to degrade it. According to Petropoulou (2015), the main reason why teachers are opposed to implementing innovative programs, such as museum education, is the size of the curriculum combined with the lack of time. She also cites the inadequate training of teachers as a major inhibiting factor, which causes anxiety and fear of something new and different from the usual.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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