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Policy Briefing 3

Dialogue, Argumentation, and Creative Practices as Tools in Cultural Literacy Learning in Europe

AUTHORS

Katja Mäkinen

Tuuli Lähdesmäki

University of
Jyväskylä
Finland

CONTACT

Project Coordinator

Fiona Maine

University of

Cambridge

UK

flm27@cam.ac.uk

Summary

One of the greatest challenges in today's European societies is the polarization of societal groups and opinions. Attempts to tackle this challenge need to start from children and young people. Cultural literacy learning is a key to advance tolerant, empathetic, and inclusive attitudes towards diversity and differences. It is important that the EU strengthens its current education initiatives and policies and creates new ones emphasizing cultural literacy learning based on dialogue and argumentation as core skills for participating in a pluralistic society. These initiatives and policies should recognize creative practices as an effective arena for teaching empathy. The EU's education policies and initiatives could better acknowledge young children and early education.

Introduction

Education policies are crucial means to enhance peaceful coexistence in a culturally diverse Europe. Based on a multidisciplinary international research project Dialogue and Argumentation for Cultural Literacy Learning in Schools (DIALLS), **this policy brief makes recommendations for the authors of future education policies in Europe about how to improve constructive interaction and mutual understanding.**

One of the greatest challenges in current societies is the fragmentation and polarization of both societal groups and opinions into bubbles or silos – that is, people living in parallel communities without any deeper connections between them. In such a situation, genuine interaction between diverse groups is increasingly important: knowledge and openness must be increased to overcome ignorance, prejudice, and insensitivity (Lähdesmäki, Koistinen, and Ylönen 2020). There is a need for greater recognition and acceptance of difference in its many forms as well as for encounters based on mutual respect and an interest in

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understanding differences. **Cultural literacy learning is a key to advance constructive dialogue and tolerant, empathetic, and inclusive attitudes towards diversity** (Maine and Vrikki 2021).

To meet these challenges, DIALLS has developed the concept and practices of cultural literacy, reconceptualized as a social practice that is inherently dialogic and based on gaining and constructing knowledge through empathetic, tolerant, and inclusive interaction with others (Maine, Cook, and Lähdesmäki 2019). **This notion of cultural literacy means seeing dialogue, argumentation, and interactive creative practices as tools for encountering differences with an open mind.** These constructive encounters help us to recognize and express our own and others' cultural features, values, and identities and increase our experiential understanding of what it means to differ from other people. Most importantly, they enable us to understand that we are all different. Dialogue in DIALLS then pertains to engagement with cultures, values, heritages, and identities of both the self and others. This creative positive engagement with diversity is based on a conception of culture as a fluid and “dynamic co-construction, lived in the present and not solely rooted in the past” (Maine, Cook, and Lähdesmäki 2019, 389).

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit children and young people hard. This generation is affected by lockdowns, interruption of schooling and hobbies, physical distancing from their classmates, peers and grandparents, unemployment in families, and the general uncertainty. Learning, socio-economic, and welfare difficulties are exacerbated. **Long after the pandemic, schools and the surrounding society will be in turmoil, and the need to analyse all this and its emotional and other implications is urgent. DIALLS offers practical and conceptual tools for this highly significant task.**

Evidence and analysis

In the DIALLS project, a broad consortium of scholars and educators from various backgrounds and in different educational settings has created cross-curricular resources, activities, and pedagogical tools for learning cultural literacy. **The Cultural Literacy Learning Programme (CLLP) was developed to teach children (aged 5–15) dialogue and argumentation** as core skills needed for meaningful interactions in the classroom.

Cultural literacy learning through dialogue and argumentation

Dialogue and argumentation are essential skills for participating in a pluralistic society. These skills include listening carefully, building on and being sensitive to each other's viewpoints, critiquing perspectives thoughtfully, thinking about shared values, carefully positioning ideas, respectful disagreement, and acknowledgement that one has changed one's mind. Dialogue and argumentation skills enable children and young people to communicate across their diversity and work towards accepting multiple viewpoints. Cultural literacy implies a dynamic and continuous dialogical process of co-constructing meanings and mutual negotiation of identities and points of view (Maine, Cook, and Lähdesmäki 2019; DIALLS 2020a; DIALLS 2020b). Such skills are also needed for solving challenges like climate change together in a divided world (Lähdesmäki et al. 2021 forthcoming; UN 2007).

In its “Competences for Democratic Culture. Living Together as Equals in Culturally Diverse Democratic Societies” the Council of Europe (2016) emphasizes that we must teach young people how to embrace, and not fear, diversity, and how to think critically. In DIALLS, this twofold educational aim of embracing diversity and critical thinking was fostered through the ethos of genuine dialogue and constructive argumentation created throughout the CLLP lessons. The specific cultural literacy learning goals of these lessons emerged from the policy documentation analysis performed as part of DIALLS.

The goal of the CLLP is to explore how **empathy, inclusion, and tolerance as the core attitudes of cultural literacy** manifest in and are learned through dialogical practice as well as to train intercultural communication competencies through active participation in processes of negotiation, care, and understanding (DIALLS 2020b, 4; Maine and Vrikki 2021).

Empathy enables deep understanding that is a crucial dimension of argumentation. It means an effort to understand the information underlying a specific claim in a dialogue including the speaker's position, beliefs, attitudes, emotions, insights, and values connected to a claim. Empathy helps interlocutors understand why speakers hold a position and what he or she thinks and feels about it as well as to perceive, experience, or appraise the other's perspectives, references, and narratives. This may enable interlocutors to understand a state of affairs from the viewpoint of the other, to adopt views different from their own, and to question and challenge their own views (DIALLS 2020b, 7–8, 12).

The Council of Europe (2016) connects tolerance to recognizing both the dignity, rights, and freedoms of the other and equality between the self and the other. Tolerance in dialogue means active listening, caring sensitivity, and encouraging the others to take part in the knowledge construction process and seeking to explain and understand their views, without excluding them through negative value judgements.

Inclusion as an educational, political and social movement defends the right of all individuals to participate in society and to be accepted and respected in what differentiates them from others. In dialogue, inclusion means creating opportunities for more individuals to openly participate in knowledge construction and exchange different views (inviting and eliciting others' viewpoints). For example, students can express inclusion when they spontaneously constructively respond to another student's ideas in a classroom discussion or when they invite their peers to participate in small-group discussions (DIALLS 2020b, 10).

Research in the DIALLS project shows how children and young people practised tolerance, empathy, and inclusion in dialogue during DIALLS lessons (DIALLS 2020b, 98). In these dialogues, students express and develop through mutual interactions their relationship with other cultures, values, and viewpoints. The results indicate that educational dialogues – in particular the CLLP proposed in DIALLS – can guide students in learning how to interact with different viewpoints and different background knowledge (DIALLS 2020b, 12).

Learning cultural literacy by engaging in creative practices

The CLLP recognizes that creative practices have potential in teaching and learning cultural literacy. Using wordless picture books and short films, the programme encourages students to create cultural artefacts of their own, such as drawings, photographs, and collages, in order to recognize, negotiate, and empathize with cultural differences. **Artistic and creative practices that are not language based enable children to process what can be difficult to express in words, whether in speech or writing** (Lähdesmäki et al. 2021, forthcoming). Through its wordless mode of expression, creative practices offer a flexible arena for practising cultural literacy and dialogue that crosses language barriers and can enhance empathy.

The research in the DIALLS project showed how even the youngest research participants can deal with complex and abstract ideas and emotions through dialogue and creative practices. They are also able to utilize cultural symbols and recycle cultural imageries. Through the dynamic process of creating the artefacts, the students negotiated with themselves and their peers and tested their ideas about belonging to a place or a group of people; living together with others who may be different; rights and responsibilities as members of a community and society; and tolerant, empathetic, and inclusive attitudes towards other people.





In their artefacts, the students did not usually underline difference or challenges related to being different. On the contrary, **the students presented difference as a normal and positive feature of everyday life by depicting different characters doing various daily activities together in diverse environments.** They thus focused on the ways to strengthen agreement, belonging, or inclusion and to celebrate diversity by underlining equality and togetherness.

Numerous empirical and educational studies indicate that art is an effective pedagogical tool for teaching empathy and respect for difference (e.g. Lähdesmäki and Koistinen 2021; Lähdesmäki et al. 2021, forthcoming). Making art is a creative process that fosters the imagination, innovation, and problem solving that are crucial for cultural literacy. Engaging with creative practices can broaden our awareness of self and others and foster mutual understanding. It can help us understand knowledge as situated and positional, depending for instance, on one's gender, class, or ethnicity. Therefore, creative practices can foster dialogue between us and others. It can raise awareness of the experiences of others and foster empathy. The outcomes of creative practices in the CLLP indicate the students' multifaceted capacity for cognitive, affective/emotional, and compassionate empathy (Lähdesmäki et al. 2021, forthcoming).

The research highlights the importance of creative practices as a mode of communication through which children and young people can deal with and shape their mental images and understanding of the world in a constructive and dialogic process of thinking in action. This process allows children and young people to develop their imagination, emotional responses, personality, position in the community, and relationship with others and the external world. Based on our analysis of how students co-created meanings through dialogic creative practices in the CLLP, we conclude that these practices help children and young people to deepen their understanding of the contemporary world fraught with challenges such as exclusion, intolerance, and climate change. **The CLLP offers useful tools for teachers and researchers interested in teaching empathy and cultural literacy through dialogic teaching** (Maine and Čermáková 2021) **and creative practices.**

Research parameters

This policy brief is based on two broad datasets from research conducted in the framework of the CLLP. The programme was implemented in over 250 classes in Cyprus, Germany, Israel, Lithuania, Spain, Portugal, and the UK in the school year of 2019–2020 with three age groups of students aged 5–6, 8–9, and 14–15. The CLLP included 15 lessons on different themes: living together (including celebration of diversity, solidarity, equality, human rights, democracy, and globalization); social responsibility (including social and civic competences, sustainable development, and active participation); belonging (including home); and tolerance, empathy, and inclusion as the core attitudes for cultural literacy learning.

The first dataset includes classroom and small-group discussions of the DIALLS themes. They were transcribed and constructed as a multilingual corpus that was coded according to a coding scheme developed in the project. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the coded data was conducted at macro, meso, and micro levels with the scope of identifying the instances of the manifestation of cultural literacy attitudes among the students (DIALLS 2020b). **The second dataset is the artefacts and their brief explanations created in each lesson.** Data-driven content analysis of this data utilized qualitative categorizing, quantification of its core features and visual elements, and self-reflexive and collaborative interpretation of the meanings in the artefacts (Lähdesmäki et al. 2020, forthcoming).

Policy implications and recommendations

Based on our findings in the DIALLS project, we make seven recommendations for education initiatives and policies in the European Union:

- 1) **Strengthen the European Union's current education initiatives and policies and create new ones emphasizing cultural literacy learning that include early education.** Cultural literacy must be accessible to learners of all ages, including the youngest. Mobility and exchange programmes train cultural literacy in practice but these programmes are targeted to young adults. It is important to create education initiatives for early learners training cultural literacy and give students from all social classes more equal access to these programmes.
- 2) **Take into account the multimodality of the processes through which students construct, express, and share meanings.** These policies and initiatives could use creative practices to teach and learn cultural literacy.
- 3) **To develop cultural literacy learning, give children and young people more agency.** Pedagogic activities must not present learners with pre-selected ideas or perspectives. Creative practices should enable students to initiate and test new ideas, points of view, and understandings, to promote creativity as an ongoing process. Policies and initiatives for cultural literacy learning must promote knowledge production and dialogic thinking in action initiated by children and young people themselves.
- 4) **Discuss differences carefully to avoid presenting the coexistence of cultures as a problem and source of conflict.** The authors of initiatives and policies must pay attention to who defines differences and who decides whether and when they are problematic or challenging. While it is important to encourage children and young people to see differences so that they can recognize the inequalities embedded in them, education policies and practices must not unintentionally create difference through attempts to celebrate diversity. Distinctions may exist only in the adults' reality, while children and young people may not see these differences or consider them meaningless.
- 5) **Make cultural literacy learning timelier, focus on contemporary global challenges, and strengthen learners' critical thinking.** This would help children and young people to understand that humans make both problems and solutions and encourage learners to seek structural changes. Dialogic creative practices are an effective channel for such joint efforts, for instance to counter climate crisis and social polarization. Solidarity should be a key element of education policies and practices. Cultural literacy includes practising dialogue on uncommon ground. Thus it supports solidarity: it is not only about "feeling with you" but also "standing with you" – even with the "you" I do not know.
- 6) **Recognize that the relations between children and adults in adult-guided pedagogic practices impact on learning outcomes, and ensure that these relations limit learners' own agency in the meaning making and knowledge production as little as possible.** When planning pedagogic activities, it is important to ensure that students from different backgrounds have equal opportunities to participate in dialogue. Hierarchical positions may hinder equal and emphatic encounters beyond school contexts in the surrounding society; to counter this, power structures between the underprivileged and privileged must be made visible. Therefore, teacher education should include raising awareness of the power questions concerning equality, equal access, non-discrimination, and inclusion.
- 7) Pedagogy in which teachers model democratic dialogue is crucial for improving students' cultural literacy. **Embed issues of cultural literacy and dialogue skills in European education initiatives that focus on teacher training and exchange.**





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