DEVELOPING SOCIO-CULTURAL COMPETENCIES IN TEACHER TRAINEES: AN APPROACH BASED ON PEDAGOGICAL ANIMATION

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Abstract: This study examines the effectiveness of pedagogical animation as an approach for developing socio-cultural competencies among teacher trainees. The experimental research was conducted in a university environment with the participation of forty students enrolled in the part-time Bachelor's degree programme in Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy at Burgas State University "Prof. Dr. Assen Zlatarov". The participants, all in their final year of study and preparing for graduation, were divided into an experimental and a control group. The experiment was conducted under the academic supervision and motivational guidance of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zlatka Dimitrova, whose lectures inspired the students to apply the principles of pedagogical animation in practice. The experimental group was trained through Abner's three stage model, which integrates social engagement, creative interpretation, and professional cultural realisation. A mixed-method research design was applied, combining observation, structured interviews, and quantitative analysis. The results revealed a significant improvement in the experimental group's levels of motivation, creativity, cultural sensitivity, empathy, and professional confidence, whereas the control group showed only moderate progress. The findings confirm that pedagogical animation can function as an effective educational technology for fostering socio-cultural awareness, professional growth, and cultural mediation in future teachers. When applied within university training, this approach enables students to recognise the educational potential of cultural heritage as a dynamic resource that connects learning with community, identity, and professional development.

Keywords: *Pedagogical animation, socio-cultural competencies, teacher training, Abner's model, experiential learning, cultural mediation, higher education, professional development.*

Introduction

In recent years, a noticeable decline in interest towards cultural activities has been observed within education, particularly among children of primary school age. Museums, which for decades have served as spaces of curiosity and inspiration, are now increasingly empty. This phenomenon cannot be explained solely by the influence of technology or the growing dominance of digital forms of interaction. It also reflects the weakening of the family's role as a formative environment in which culture traditionally holds its natural place. When the family no longer fulfils its formative role as a transmitter of cultural values, the school becomes the primary space in which cultural awareness can be nurtured. Under these conditions, pedagogical animation gains particular relevance, as it functions as a mechanism for restoring cultural presence, reviving the spiritual dimension of tradition, and transforming cultural encounters into lived educational experience. According to Prof. Dr. Siika Chavdarova, the parent is the first and most important educative factor in the process of cultural upbringing [1]. It is the parent who must nurture in the child a sense of belonging to cultural tradition, respect for spiritual achievements and a genuine need to experience art. When the family fails to cultivate such an attitude, the school becomes the only institution capable of awakening pupils' interest in culture and

shaping their relationship to spiritual values. Here emerges the teacher's essential role, for it is through pedagogical mastery that the link between the child and culture can be restored. Within the framework of the full-day organisation of the school schedule, established by Ordinance No. 10 of the Ministry of Education and Science (amended in State Gazette No. 78, 2020), Article 26 stipulates that activities of interest shall include various forms and thematic areas designed to provide opportunities for inclusive education and shall be organised in accordance with the requirements of the Regulation on Inclusive Education. The content of these activities is determined annually in the school programme for activities of interest, in line with Article 21d of the same Regulation [2]. This provision creates a real pedagogical space in which teachers can design and conduct learning beyond the traditional classroom environment. It offers not only administrative flexibility but also the possibility to transform cultural and community settings into educational environments. Within this context, pedagogical animation emerges as a natural means of activating pupils' curiosity, emotional engagement and cultural awareness, thereby fulfilling the purpose of the regulation itself to support inclusive, value-based and experiential learning. This should not be seen as an administrative privilege but as a
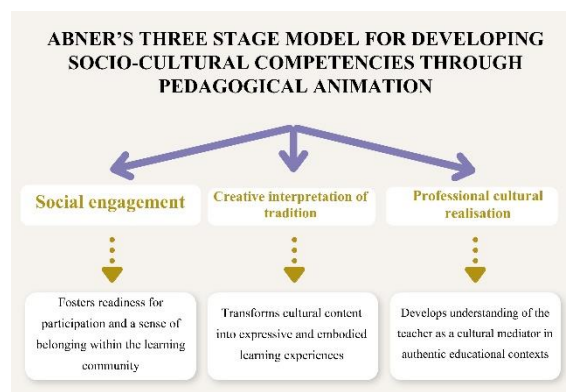
pedagogical responsibility. The teacher's task is to turn such visits into experiences that leave a lasting impression on pupils' minds. A visit to a museum or an art gallery acquires real educational meaning only when the teacher knows how to prepare children for encountering culture, how to capture their attention and how to inspire them to search for answers. In this process, facts are not merely accumulated; values are formed. The child begins to see culture not as something distant and formal but as part of their own inner world. The preparation of future teachers should therefore focus precisely on this capacity: how to awaken interest and how to transform cultural spaces into pedagogical environments. Pedagogical animation offers a pathway to such formation, as it unites cognitive and emotional learning and turns every meeting with culture into a lived experience. Through it, the teacher learns to transmit spirit, to inspire and to draw pupils closer to the spiritual richness that cannot be found on the internet but only through genuine encounters with art and history.

Exposition

Pedagogical animation is one of the most contemporary disciplines within educational science, rethinking the teacher's role and placing at the centre of the learning process genuine interaction, lived experience and creativity. In its essence, animation represents a philosophy of pedagogical communication which affirms that knowledge is constructed through active participation and emotional engagement [3]. According to the French pedagogical tradition, the animator is the person who creates atmosphere, inspires, leads and involves participants in an event through which they discover meaning for themselves [4]. Pedagogical animation first emerged within the field of social education and extracurricular activity, yet it gradually established itself as an effective instrument within formal instruction. As Raymond Toraille emphasises, there is no true opposition between pedagogy and animation, for "every pedagogy that seeks to guide the pupil towards becoming a person is, in its very nature, an authentic form of animation" [5]. Through animation, the teacher, he writes, "gives soul to the class" and "transforms teaching into living communication." It is precisely this awakening of awareness and participation that gives animation its educative dimension. Toraille's understanding places the emphasis not on outward form but on the spiritual essence of the pedagogical act. Contemporary interpretations of the animative approach develop this idea by carrying its humanistic logic into the preparation of future educators. Research shows that through playful, creative and communicative forms, student teachers experience the role of the animator not from the outside but from within, as active participants who organise, sense and interpret their pedagogical work [6]; [7]. Such experiential mastery of the pedagogical situation leads to awareness of its formative strength. The teacher-animator becomes a creator of an environment where every action bears meaning, pedagogical value and cultural intention. This approach fosters in participants an inner sense of belonging and personal commitment, transforming education into a process of mutual spiritual growth [8]. In this sense, pedagogical animation has become an essential part of the professional culture of the modern teacher, as it is through it that empathy, a sense of community and conscious participation in the spiritual life of society are formed. On this humanistic and cultural foundation stands Abner's model, which translates the principles of the French school into contemporary pedagogical practice. Through its three successive stages of social engagement, creative interpretation and professional cultural realisation, it demonstrates how animation can

serve as a pathway for developing sociocultural competencies in future teachers and for restoring the meaning of pedagogy as the art of inspiration.

Figure 1. An authorial framework

ABNER'S THREE STAGE MODEL FOR DEVELOPING SOCIO-CULTURAL COMPETENCIES THROUGH PEDAGOGICAL ANIMATION

Social engagement — Fosters readiness for participation and a sense of belonging within the learning community

Creative interpretation of tradition — Transforms cultural content into expressive and embodied learning experiences

Professional cultural realisation — Develops understanding of the teacher as a cultural mediator in authentic educational contexts

At the first stage of the model, the participants, who are student teachers in their final stage of professional preparation, are placed in a simulated learning environment in which they personally experience play as a social and cultural practice. This gives future educators the opportunity to feel the process internally, in the same way that pupils in middle childhood would experience it when the method is applied in real school conditions. The aim of the initial stage is to build psychological readiness for participation, since cultural tradition can be perceived authentically only when one feels accepted within the community that sustains it. The playful dimension therefore has a preparatory function: it activates belonging, lowers emotional resistance and fosters personal engagement. The second stage emphasizes creative transformation. The student teacher interprets a selected Bulgarian tradition and re-creates it through artistic, kinaesthetic or performative expression. In this process, the transition occurs from knowing to expressing; the ability to preserve the living meaning of cultural heritage becomes visible. When a future teacher leaves a personal artistic imprint on a ritual, they already participate in the safeguarding of cultural continuity in educational settings. The third stage concerns educative socialisation and the formation of professional identity. After the experiential and creative phases, a reflective stage follows, in which experience becomes both personal insight and a professional pedagogical stance. The student teacher recognises how the animative approach can be applied in classroom or museum environments to introduce pupils to cultural life, strengthen their sense of belonging and encourage participation. On this basis, competence is formed. The student emerges as a prepared cultural mediator, capable of translating tradition into authentic pedagogical practice. These three stages form a coherent progression that leads from lived experience to conscious implementation. Through this structured process, socio-cultural and animative competencies are actively developed in future teachers, enabling them to guide pupils toward meaningful cultural participation. A key aspect of this model is the opportunity for student teachers to practise real animative interaction, to lead a group, and to experience the dynamic response of an audience. The ability to animate, engage and hold the attention of participants stands at the core of their professional readiness, as it demonstrates how cultural content can come alive when delivered with confidence, emotion and pedagogical purpose.

Figure 2. Practical application of animative pedagogy

Results

To examine the effectiveness of the pedagogical animation model, a qualitative analysis was conducted, incorporating elements of structured interview and observation. Students from both groups shared their impressions and reflections during the practical sessions, and their responses were systematised according to key indicators: motivation, creativity, cultural sensitivity, empathy, and professional confidence. The collected data were then processed and transformed into a quantitative format through data entry and analysis in Microsoft Excel, which enabled a comparative examination of the pre-test and post-test levels of development within each group. This mixed-method approach provided a comprehensive view of the process by combining the participants' qualitative experiences with an objective quantitative assessment of the achieved results. The integration of observation, interview, and statistical generalisation confirmed the tangible effect of pedagogical animation on the formation of socio-cultural competencies among future teachers. The study involved a total of 40 students from the Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy programme in part-time mode of study, fourth year. The participants were divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group was trained using the pedagogical animation model developed to foster socio-cultural competencies, while the control group continued their training through the standard programme without the inclusion of animative methods.

Figure 3. Comparative results for control and experimental groups
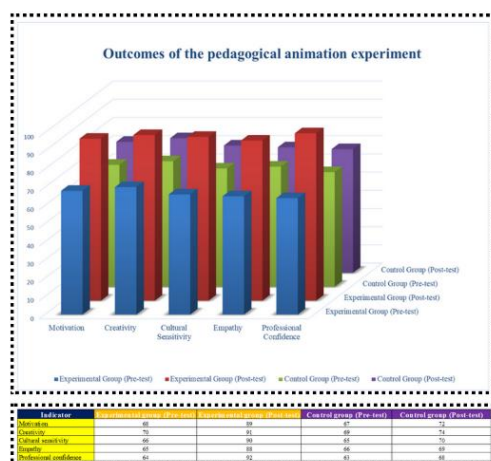
The implementation process unfolded in three stages: social engagement, creative interpretation, and professional cultural realisation. At the initial diagnostic stage, both groups demonstrated similar levels of motivation, creativity, and cultural sensitivity. However, after the application of the model, a clear difference emerged. Students in the experimental group exhibited a higher level of engagement and a stronger ability to interpret cultural content, as well as a more pronounced sense of belonging to the professional teaching community. During the practical sessions, they displayed greater confidence in their role as animators and demonstrated the ability to organise a learning environment that integrated cognitive and emotional dimensions. They reported that through the model they realised how culture can be presented in an accessible and inspiring way, allowing children to experience knowledge rather than merely receive it. The control group, in contrast, remained within the framework of traditional methods and showed less progress in developing the ability to create an interactive and culturally enriched pedagogical environment. The results of the comparative analysis reveal that the pedagogical animation model has a measurable effect on the development of socio-cultural competencies. Students in the experimental group demonstrated higher levels of empathy, greater cultural awareness, and a stronger readiness to apply creative approaches in their future professional practice. These findings confirm that pedagogical animation is not merely a means of activation but a holistic method of education and professional growth. The results reveal a clear and consistent positive trend in the experimental group following the implementation of the pedagogical animation model. The mean scores in the experimental group increased from 68 to 89 for motivation, from 70 to 91 for creativity, from 66 to 90 for cultural sensitivity, from 65 to 88 for empathy, and from 64 to 92 for professional confidence. These changes correspond to improvements between 21 and 28 points and indicate a shift from moderate to high levels across all measured dimensions. In contrast, the control group, which followed the traditional programme, shows only modest progress. The scores increased from 67 to 72 for motivation, from 69 to 74 for creativity, from 65 to 70 for cultural sensitivity, from 66 to 69 for empathy, and from 63 to 68 for professional confidence. The improvements range between 3 and 5 points and remain within the moderate level of development. The comparison between the two groups demonstrates that the application of the pedagogical animation model leads to substantially higher growth in socio cultural competencies. The strongest effect is observed in professional confidence and cultural sensitivity, followed closely by creativity and empathy, which confirms that the model supports not only cognitive engagement but also the personal and value oriented formation of future teachers.

Conclusion

The results of the conducted study confirm the effectiveness of pedagogical animation as an approach for developing socio-cultural competencies among future teachers. The implementation of Abner's model demonstrated that the inclusion of play-based, creative, and educational elements in teacher preparation leads to a significant increase in students' motivation, creativity, cultural sensitivity, empathy, and professional confidence. The comparison between the experimental and control groups reveals a clearly expressed difference in the level of socio-cultural development. While the control group showed only moderate progress, the experimental group demonstrated sustainable improvement, which proves that

pedagogical animation stimulates both cognitive engagement and personal development among learners. The model reinforces the role of the teacher as a cultural mediator. The obtained results indicate that pedagogical animation can be applied as an educational technology that supports professional growth and enhances the cultural awareness of future educators. The students themselves confirmed these findings when they implemented their own animative project. They discovered that cultural heritage comes alive only when it is experienced. They realised that museums and traditional practices should not remain distant from the school environment and that such encounters can serve as a meaningful pedagogical resource. Through this process, they came to understand the profound impact that direct contact with the living history of one's community can have on the learner's sense of identity and belonging.

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