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Creativity, activity, voluntary work –activities of students participating in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme

Kreatywność, aktywność, wolontariat – o zaangażowaniu uczniów realizujących program matury międzynarodowej IB

Abstract: The article focuses on CAS, (i.e. *creativity, activity, service*), a subject which constitutes one of the core requirements of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IB DP). Its specific character and assumptions require skills connected with cognitive engagement, self-development and social activity from the students. This subject matter is overlooked and remains unexplored in pedagogical research. The issues discussed in the article are part of a broader reflection on the reconstruction of the value of the social world of schools implementing the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. The empirical material was collected from 6 focus group interviews with students and from participant observation. Using a qualitative research strategy and grounded methodology procedures we reconstructed the ways in which students deal with the completion of CAS. The analysis of the empirical material enabled us to identify three strategies employed alternately by students. This is due to the specificity of the subject, the need to implement the program assumptions, as well as the acquisition of planning and time management skills. The practical goal of our research was to sensitize teachers to the diversity of students' coping with

the implementation of CAS, as well as to draw their attention to the value of this subject and its demanding nature.

Keywords: IB programme, CAS, social world, ethnography, qualitative research.

Introduction

The Polish education system has been undergoing dynamic changes for years, initiated, among others, by the political transformation process, followed by the country's accession to the European Union (EU). Social and political reforms have contributed to the opening of borders and migration, and in education to the emergence of new challenges facing both schools and teachers, whose task is subjective, participatory education based not only on providing young people with knowledge, but above all on preparing them for contact with people from other cultures, and in the long run, education and employment abroad.

The cultural, social, political and economic transformations highlighted the importance of such values as responsibility, a pro-social attitude, readiness to act on behalf of the community and provide assistance, integrity, liberty, democracy, truth, justice, equality and social dialogue (*Journal of Laws from 1997, No. 78, item 483*). As a result, a new vision of the individual and of society was reflected in the educational policy, including the objectives and curricula, organisation and as well as in the relations between students and teachers. The educational process now included competencies related to building self-awareness, raising students' interests, promoting individual study, developing cooperation and teamwork skills, respecting the rights of others, overcoming stereotypes, problem-solving and conflict resolution.

An example of a curriculum which emphasises general development of students through providing essential knowledge and practical skills is the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IB DP). It was first introduced in Poland in the 1990's while its beginnings date back to 1968. It has been widely popular around the world, as confirmed by statistical data showing a systematic increase in the number of institutions implementing the IB programme. According to the *International Baccalaureate Organization* there are currently 5500 IB schools and the program is being implemented in 150 countries. In Poland there are 65 schools which implement the IB programme (https://ibo.org/). Education within the IB framework can include one or more of these four programmes: Primary Years Programme – PYP; Middle Years Programme – MYP; Diploma Programme

– DP; Career-related Programme - CP. In the article we focus on the IB DP programme which shows significant aspects of education through the prism of shaping attitudes and values among students which are desired in the contemporary world. Moreover, we refer to one of the core subjects in the programme, i.e. *Creativity, Activity, Service* (CAS), which emphasises the development of creative thinking, involvement and inquisitiveness, shapes a sense of responsibility and sensitivity to important social problems. The subject is completed through project work in three areas: creativity (broadly understood artistic work which involves the development of creative thinking and sensitivity to art), activity (care for one's health and sustainable body development; a form of compensation for physical education classes which are not part of the programme) and voluntary work (activities shaping a sense of responsibility and sensitivity to important social issues). During two years of study students have to take 150 hours of CAS and the results are included in their final assessment. Their mark is based on reports which include a description of the tasks and elements of self-evaluation. Student projects provide a space for broadly understood human development, while specific components enable students to acquire attributes described in the learner profile. The assumptions behind CAS include objectives and values which allow students to strengthen their sense of individual identity, build social relations, undertake activity in social life and assume responsibility for other people. Using a qualitative research strategy and grounded methodology procedures we reconstructed the ways in which students deal with the completion of CAS. It is worth mentioning here the research conducted around the implementation of CAS. Together, researchers emphasize the value of this course, at the same time emphasizing that it is extremely demanding and engaging for both students and teachers (Billig and Good, 2013; Hatziconstantis and Kolympari, 2016). Billing and Good (2013) pointed out that the implementation of CAS supports the balanced development of the child, and the requirements may constitute circumstances conducive to the awakening and discovery of students' potential. "Some saw the program as the antidote to the strong emphasis on academic performance and believe that the program was a stress-reducer for some students and for others, a way to bring them "out of their shells." (Billing and Good, 2013, p. 30).

On the other hand, research by Hatziconstantis and Kolympari (2016) proved that the achieved results depend on the students' attitude towards this subject. „The empirical results indicate that students perceive and conceptualise volunteering activities in two contrasting dimensions, namely idealistic-humanitarian and utilitarian-instrumentalist, implying that Academic

Service Learning projects may need to be adjusted to achieve their objectives" (Hatziconstantis and Kolympari, 2016, p. 1).

Theoretical-Methodological Aspects of the Authors' Research

The qualitative research strategy focused on an interpretative paradigm set the direction of the undertaken analyses. The paradigm emphasises the processual and emergent character of social reality, which is dynamic, while relations, which constitute its main building block, are more or less ephemeral. "In the interpretative paradigm the term activity is juxtaposed to meaningless behaviour" (Konecki, 2000, p. 17). Our main theoretical perspective is symbolic interactionism, according to which social actors begin to interpret and define undertaken actions rather than react to them. This means that an individual is a subject capable of generating meaning, processing information directed at him or her, learning and analysing previous experiences and ultimately of reacting and taking action (Blumer, 2009; Hałas, 2006). Symbolic interactionism places processes of exchange, interpretation and ascribing meaning, as well as the construction of the social actor's identity in various relations at the centre of interest (Blumer, 2009; Hałas, 2006). Thus, an individual is active, reflective and possesses the capability of self-perception (Blumer, 2009).

In the article we focused on the perspectives of the students and on their methods of coping with the completion of the mandatory course, which is a both a distinguishing feature and a determinant of the graduate profile as described in the IB programme. The presented analyses constitute a part of a broader research project on the reconstruction of the functions of international education programmes in Poland, which included interviews with teachers and students of international schools[1].

The results presented in this article were derived through analyses of empirical material, conducted in accordance with grounded theory methodology (GTM), which is based on generating mid-range theories arrived at through systematic and reliable collection and analysis of data. The creators of grounded theory offer researchers a set of tools and guidelines which make it possible to order and control the course of the study. This refers to the rhetoric of theory generation, which includes theoretical collection of samples, comparative analysis, theoretical saturation of categories and

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[1]   "Badania porównawcze funkcji międzynarodowych programów kształcenia w Polsce" ["Comparative Studies of Functions of International Education Programmes in Poland"], Narodowe Centrum Nauki, Sonata Bis, project no. 2020/38/E/HS6/00048.

focused coding. As a result, grounded theory makes it possible to predict, explain and understand social behaviours (Konecki, 2000; Charmaz, 2009).

Theory construction as a process is not a verification of earlier hypotheses through subsequently collected data. Data collection, building and verification of hypotheses are not clearly separated in time, as in the case of traditional research. They are procedures, which intertwine in the course of the long process of theory generation. (Konecki, 2000, p. 27).

Taking into account the importance of coding for the process of theory generation, we used the potential of focused coding, which includes causal and intervening conditions, interactions, strategies and tactics, context, as well as the consequences of undertaken activities.

Meetings with the respondents usually took place at the schools where the students studied. We made sure that respondents were given a private classroom where they would feel comfortable and safe. The initial question was: why did you decide to enroll in the IB programme?

Empirical material was collected in the course of group interviews conducted with students of international schools in Poland (Kvale, 2010; Hammersley, Atkinson, 2000). As a result we were able to speak with 42 students – 23 women and 19 men – completing the IB programme in private or public schools. Despite the seemingly characteristic feature of the research group, which is homogeneity, we managed to capture many shades of the respondents' shared experience. The respondents presented various experiences with the IB programme. We carried out research in 21 schools implementing the IB programme in Poland. The group included both people who participated in the programme from the beginning of their education, and those who enrolled in secondary school. The multitude of experiences gathered by the respondents over the years was very valuable and important at the interpretative level. We were able to speak with novices – students who were only just beginning their education in the IB PD and specialists, i.e. experienced students. We made an interesting observation that the statements made by the former were marked by greater intensity and emotion, a blend of excitement, concerns joy and fear of the unknown. The respondents prioritised emotions which accompanied them while they were becoming familiar with the IB programme. Representatives of the latter group shared their experiences in an instructive and task-oriented manner. Emotions which appeared in their descriptions were related to the initial period, when they were novices. The narrators evoked memories of coping in the initial period of their education. The events which remained vivid in their memories were

mainly centred around CAS, a subject which is not required in the Polish education programme.

"Well, it was difficult at first because I didn't know what to expect (…) a lot of stress. It gets better with time as you get to know it" (N1)

The strategies employed by the students to complete the core subject in the IB programme, i.e. CAS, were the subject of the analyses. The three essential elements which constitute the subject i.e. creativity, activity and service (voluntary work) are a framework and a point of reference for activities undertaken by participants in the social world. The aim of the study is to reconstruct the ways of coping with (managing) CAS employed by students enrolled in the IB programme. The following research question was developed: How do students of international schools become involved in the completion of CAS?

"Between involvement and obligation"[2]

In the presented studies the students devoted a lot of attention to CAS and to activities aimed at managing its completion. It needs to be highlighted that at the stage of conceptualisation we were not planning on focusing on one specific subject from the IB programme. However, in the course of the interviews the respondents referred to it themselves, providing detailed and extensive descriptions.

It appears that CAS is a course (subject) which is found only in the IB programme, thus the respondents defined it as a distinguishing factor. Although the convention of CAS is not typical and goes beyond the standard forms of didactic work, CAS belongs to the core of the IB DP programme. It allows the students to develop skills and attitudes through various individual and group experiences, which give them the opportunity to discover their interests and passions. The IB programme assumes that a student who undertakes activities as part of CAS becomes more aware of his or her strengths and weaknesses, obtains new knowledge, plans and initiates various enterprises, displays involvement, is able to cooperate with others, becomes involved in issues important for humanity in general and takes the ethical aspect of his or her actions into account. These traits are reflected in the IB student profile. Ultimately we managed to distinguish three strategies of managing and completing CAS which the students employed.

The first strategy called **action** is implemented by students who are sincerely interested in completing the final project diligently. Interestingly, the

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[2] *In vivo* coding*, fragment from an interview conducted with students of international schools.

aim is not simply to pass and obtain the highest mark but to gain knowledge and experience, as well as to find space for personal development. The actions performed as part of this strategy go beyond the formally established learning outcomes, which constitute the background of student activity. This strategy is used by students who find space to fulfill their own passions, discover their strengths and weaknesses, acquire competencies and test themselves in various working environments, as part of the course. By ascribing priority status to this subject the respondents take a series of actions in order to take advantage of the potential offered by CAS.

The narrators who choose this strategy remain involved and persistent in their actions even after completing the course and finishing the academic year. Characteristic of this approach is the earlier experience of students with respect to the three key values expressed by the subject, i.e. creativity, activity and service (voluntary work). The completion of CAS is, in a way, a continuation of previously undertaken activity.

"Yes, it's CAS that allows us to follow our passions or, for example, if someone can do something, goes to art classes, they can enter those classes, describe their progress, because they would be attending them anyway." (N2)

"It's like, we have CAS and while this is a very interesting subject and very … It's a space where we have time for our passions or interests or charity work, voluntary work, and I think that to this point everyone likes it." (N3)

A variant of the action strategy is caring, characteristic of students who feel an inner need to work on behalf others within the local community. Caring is multi-dimensional, with respondents seeking activities which are beneficial for society, and which bring them joy and satisfaction. Interestingly, since the IB programme is demanding, respondents who complete CAS consider it a respite, a space to relieve stress and to "clear one's head." (N9).

The second strategy labelled **experience** places students in the role of experimenters, testing uncharted territories. For them CAS is a space to learn and to test oneself in various roles and environments. It is employed by students with no previous experience with such activities, who are interested and ready to explore the world. Completing CAS becomes and incentive to take action and a unique adventure. Similarly to the previous strategy, passing and receiving the final mark are in the background, constituting a context for a comprehensive involvement in a project carried out as part of the course. Apart from joy and satisfaction students also appreciate the conditions which foster self-knowledge, the shaping of self-awareness and plans for the future.

"This subject is fun, plain and simple." (N6)

"CAS is a lifestyle which is very useful in adult life, because no one at work will tell you to go exercise for an hour instead of sitting at the computer." (N6)

"I discovered what I like, and thanks to that I know what direction I'm going to take." (N5)

The third strategy of **obligation** is typical of students who want to pass and tick the subject off their lists. Task orientation in this context consists in a superficial fulfilment of tasks, often by resorting to easy and quick solutions which do not require involvement. Students who use this strategy focus on accompanying issues which are in the background of CAS (e.g. administrative, process-related and logistical issues) rather than the quintessential issues such as action, help or sensitization. Devoting one's energy to secondary tasks and a negative or neutral attitude towards the completion of CAS result in demotivation among the respondents.

The narrators defined CAS using such terms as "filler, addition, obligation".

Statements made by students provide interesting insights:

"Well, to be honest, everyone has a disparaging attitude towards that subject, because we don't get points or credits, it isn't taken into account in our university applications (…) you just have to do it and that's it." (N4)

"CAS is mandatory and can be fun, you do it all automatically, you do PE as part of CAS, but still it's like when school is mixed with interests and free time, I have mixed feeling about that." (N7)

Students stress that when their potential voluntary activity in any area or the development of their interests become involved in an education programme and assessment, this extinguishes their fascination and reduces the sense of doing something for oneself in one's free time.

"It's no longer something you do for fun but an obligation, because I would do it anyway even without CAS, but now I feel compelled." (N8)

The students' responses show that this strategy may be connected with their personal need to ascribe a specific rank to subjects and to conduct selection based on priority subjects and additional subjects. When sharing their experiences they highlighted a dilemma. Despite the perceived attractiveness of CAS, students who use this strategy did not ascribe priority status to it. One of the reasons for this degradation was a lack of measurable benefit which could translate into a mark or matura results. It is worth mentioning students, for whom this strategy was a form of protection. Such students do not display predispositions to initiate activities for the benefit of their local communities. The narrators admitted that they are reluctant to meet new

people and enter into cooperation with them to complete a project. For them the obligation strategy was a compromise between an honest completion of CAS and protecting their own comfort zone.

Regardless of the employed strategy, the respondents had ideas regarding modifications in the scope of organising and completing CAS as part of the IB DP. Their reflexivity stemmed from their experiences and from testing the effectiveness of various ways of managing the mandatory course, hence it is difficult to obtain a clear typology. The analyses we conducted indicate that students used various strategies, either at the same time or interchangeably. It is worth highlighting that one of the elements which hindered the completion of CAS, as indicated by the respondents, was the laborious and complicated administrative procedure, requiring time and energy.

"But because of the fact that we have to document and fill in everything. Each project – a document plus signatures, plus photographs, plus tables. All of this drains us partly of our selflessness in doing this, it sucks the willingness out of you." (N9)

These investments result in costs which are mostly emotional. Lack of time, energy and other obligations resulting from the completion of CAS lead to students feeling overburdened and stressed, as can be seen in this statement:

"For example, in the previous semester I came in, I think, at 8:00 and left at 5 pm every day. And this really influences one's well-being, and also the fact that we have obligations outside of school, for example those related to CAS, as well as various deadlines, our own hobbies and other stuff. It was really difficult to make everything work, it was impossible." (N11)

Conclusions

CAS, as one of the leading subjects in the IB programme, engages the students on a cognitive level and allows them to acquire valuable experience for their personal and social development. The presented strategies are an attempt to capture the approaches taken by students to complete the course. The conducted analyses confirmed that the activities they performed are used interchangeably, which may result from the specificity of the course, as its complexity poses a challenge not merely because of the programme requirements, but most of all because of the difficulties regarding planning, management and time organisation. Students approach the issue of managing the requirements very individually. Some connect them with their passions and interests, which they continue after finishing school, while others discover

their strengths and predispositions through their experiences. For some CAS is merely an obligation and a course that simply needs to be completed (com. Hatziconstantis and Kolympari, 2016). An interesting observation was made in the context of the profit and loss assessment conducted by the students. The response to the question: Am I gaining anything from this? was meaningful and determined the choice of strategy. Personal growth, meeting new people, doing something good for the local community, no additional evaluations or a good mark could be potential profits. The diversity in terms of reasons delineated the dynamics and background for the choice of strategies of managing with CAS. Regardless of the presented strategy the course makes the students "work on themselves" while long-term projects make it possible to independently evaluate one's development, which is the most important element of CAS. In the longer perspective students can see that the decisions they make influence not just what they do but also what they are like. Moreover, by engaging in pro-social activities they develop a sense of responsibility for themselves and their environment, while their experiences build a sense of subjectivity and agency in them. We are aware of the limitations of this research project but we hope that the analyses we conducted, which show only a fragment of the social world of students of international schools, will contribute to a discussion on ways in which students cope with education programs and in which they manage their own resources.

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