

Culture of Learning

Action research

During our stay in Latvia (6.11.-10.11.2017) we had a possibility to visit two different schools – Gulbene Secondary School No.2 and Lizums Secondary School. In our observations and discussions we drew attention to “community development”.

I was interested in students’ engagement in work of community and for community. How do they cooperate on different levels? How much are they engaged in school and town or village life? Do they volunteer for charity work? What are their motivations?

Then, after coming back to our school, I compared my students’ engagement in community development and charity work with the Latvian students’ attitude towards that kind of activity.

To find the answers to my questions I observed school life in Gulbene and Lizums and interviewed the students and the teachers.

I discovered that:

- The students in Gulbene and Lizums learn to cooperate during class (working in groups), which helps them cooperating in different big projects.
- They like to work in groups, to help each other, share skills and knowledge; also, as they share a responsibility – they feel safe. That does not mean that they hide lack of engagement one of them. On contrary, they have an awareness of their work’s goal and every single student tries to help to achieve this goal and carry out the task.
- Students in Gulbene and Lizums don’t only pay attention to their education (although they do have ambitious plans for further studies). They also do much for the other people.
- They take part in charity activities in their environment.
- They engage in working for community (for example, cleaning the park, planting trees).
- They cooperate with members of their families in schools (parent workshop) to build a community.
- Every year, they prepare a performance for the residents of the local senior estates.
- Students really like that kind of activity, they are selfless – they gain satisfaction and become self-confident by helping others. Furthermore, voluntary activities could help them in their future educational career. For volunteering in such activities as stated in previous points they can be granted certificates that help them to get into college.
- Headmasters and teachers in Lizums and Gulbene schools involve students in work for community and motivate them. They show that social ties are important, that building and maintaining them helps every member of society. They cooperate with the local entrepreneurs, artists, offices and Youth Centre (Gulbene).

Conclusions

I was impressed with students' maturity and their involvement in the local community development. I admire teachers' hard work in Gulbene and Lizums as well. Those schools are really a heart of local communities.

After my return to Cracow I tried to examine students' engagement in working for the community. My school is placed in the city, with 699 students attending. Although with that great amount of students it's not easy to involve every one of them in voluntary activity, as their teachers, we try to do so as much as we can. Our school is named after the Polish Knights of Malta, so we teach our student how to help others, e.g. in the kindergarten next door. Our slogan is: "We derive joy from doing good".

We participate in many charity actions, we cooperate with Polish Red Cross, Caritas, Great Orchestra of Christmas Help. Our students help the children of the Maltese Relief Center, poor families and animal shelters.

During charity events organized on the school grounds, students learn to selflessly help another person and how to cooperate with social organizations. Great involvement of our school's pupils confirm the words of Janusz Korczak: "youth is noble".

I asked our students what in their opinion could they gain from volunteering and this is how they responded:

- Volunteering is above all an opportunity to engage in interesting activities. By participating in such events, we have the opportunity to meet many interesting people – learn from their experiences, make new friends.
- Volunteering shows new possibilities and broadens horizons.
- Solving difficult problems and helping with important matters can help with one's self-confidence by maintaining healthy self-esteem and give satisfaction.
- Volunteering grants two extra points in school graduation certificate, which helps in getting into the high school of choice.

Conclusions

I am really proud of students in our school. They help other people selflessly and with joy. Of course, that kind of activity brings them some profit, nevertheless two extra points is not that much – they can get 200 points total for exam results and marks on the graduation certificate. The most important thing is, they learn to see the other people's needs and differences in our world. They see the poor next to the rich, the sick next to the healthy and the old next to the young. They learn that every person's moral duty is to help others. I think it is one of the most important values that they get out of our school.

When I compare the way the schools in Latvia and Poland try to teach their students to work for the community I can see many of similarities.

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