

Making the history of our school–museum “alive”

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Abstract: This paper intends to present how oral history can be utilized as a part of the procedural knowledge in a history class. The 11 years old students of the 2nd Primary School in Hydra, an island with great importance for the Greek national history, tried actively to reconstruct the past of their school, which was considered as down-graded, by interviewing old graduates. The oral testimonies were combined comparably with the written sources which were preserved in the local Historical Museum and Archive. At the end of the project, the students organized in their school class an exhibition which consisted of selections from the recorded oral material and of the old educational equipment which either was found in the school or was donated by the elder graduates and by other members of the local community who voluntarily participated in that program.

Keywords

Oral history, active learning, history workshop, project method, school museum

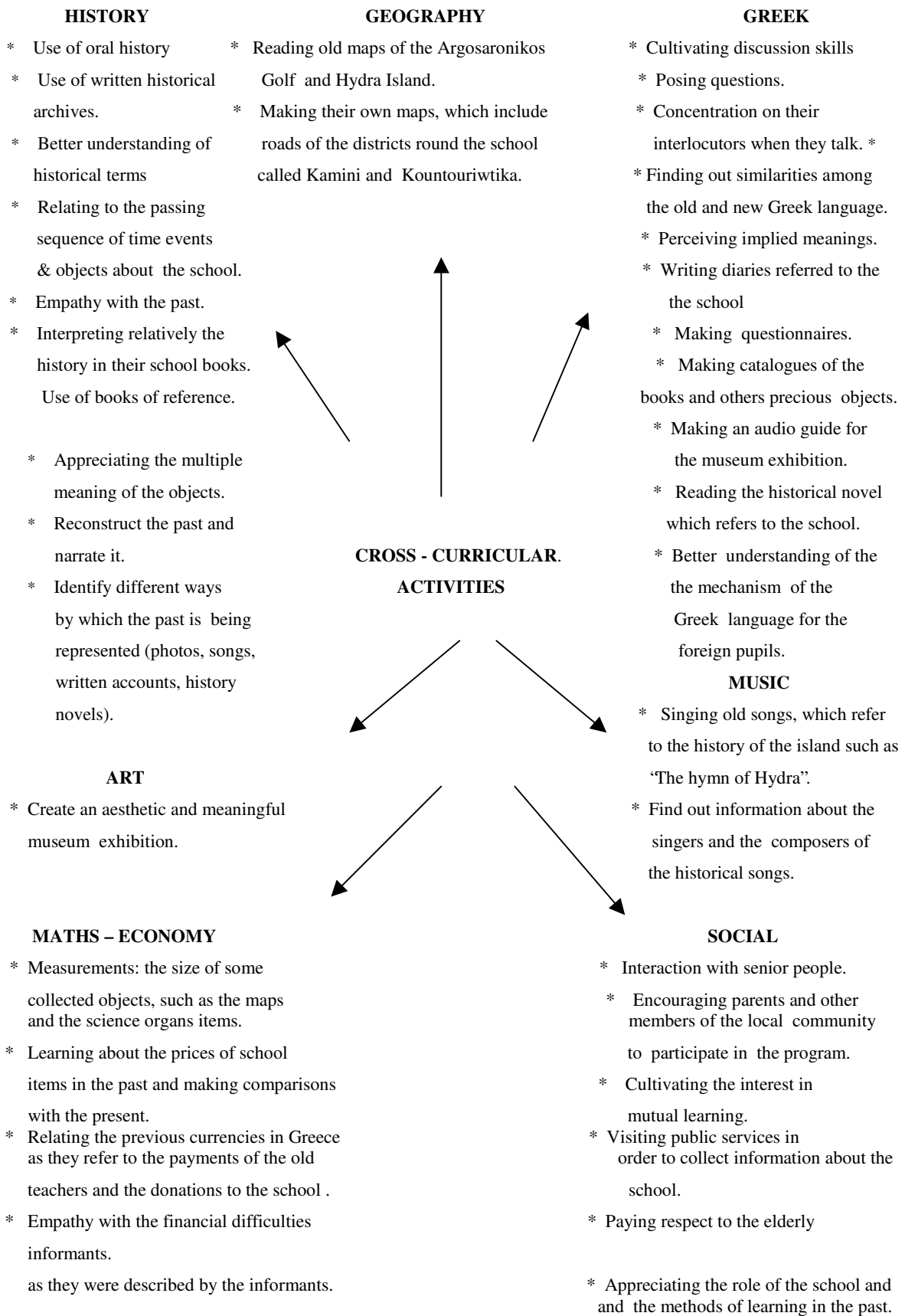
By the students of the last two classes of Hydra’s Second Primary School in school year 2001- 2002 “history” was considered as the ensemble of important military or political events and great personae, such as heroes of the battlefield or prominent politicians.

Furthermore, the same word was perceived as all the texts and the coherent written sources, of which their history book consisted. According to them history was also a synonym to the past with a strong emphasis on the dimension of the time, particularly what had passed by and was ‘behind them’ (Hewitt, p.87). They are also used to learn by heart names, dates, places, historical terms, which they tried to store up in their mind in a rather mechanistic way. Their historical knowledge was only within the bounds of their history book.

But was it possible for that history class to be ‘enlivened’? A reasonable answer could be by motivating children to make their own history. As for the students in Hydra, the opportunity was given during a coincidental discussion among them about the oldness of the school building. At the same time interesting points of view about the local community and its relation with the school were raised. According to the students ‘not only because of its location but also due to a not little number of foreign immigrants-children who were enrolled during the last decade, the school was considered as down-graded by the local community. That was also the main reason for feeling themselves inferior to the pupils of the other school’. As the topic seemed really exciting, we altogether decided to deal with the reviving of history’s school.

One of the main educational goals of the program was to motivate students to discover the knowledge by using different types of historical sources including oral testimonies. In addition to, they were given the opportunity to cultivate a great range of either oral or written linguistic abilities almost tirelessly. In great measure the program was beneficial for the students with a different mother tongue too. That target was supported by the widening of the learning process including activities, which took part outside the school class. As it was aimed too, the children should have the opportunity to interact with variant members of their community in order to draw information about the school. One of the additional goals of the project was students to acquaint themselves with the history research and to reconstruct the past by taking their own initiative and using their creativity.

The whole program lasted for four months. At the beginning the children were working for the project for two hours weekly but not exclusively during the history class. Besides, the activities were mostly cross-curricular offering useful stimuli for other cognitive fields too (Fig. I). It is worth noticing that gradually the students were willing to spare much of their free time even at their weekends.



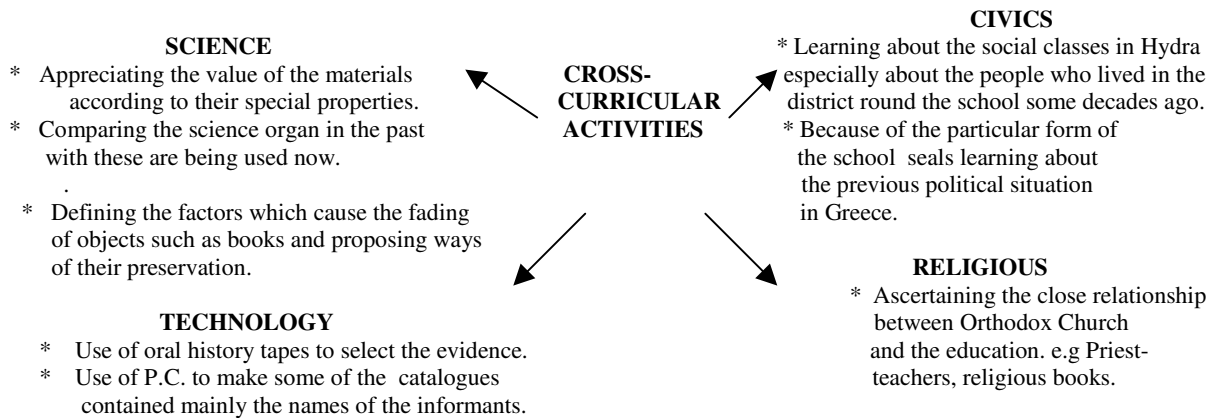


Fig. I: Oral history and Cross-curricular activities

From the beginning of that program there was a vivid effort to make the best use not only of the children’s ideas but also of their daily experience, the “ordinary” material as Hein argues (Hein, p.162). Actually, we were usually “stumbling” at old things in our school class. Faded books which were written in purist Greek, a language that was sound peculiar and jesting to the pupils, dusty, leathered maps, obsolete physics instruments and even more an antiquated, traditional school bell. These objects were constituted the initial point for the reconstruction of the past. As they were part of the children’s school life they could be used as a directly tangible token of the school’s history (Fig. II).

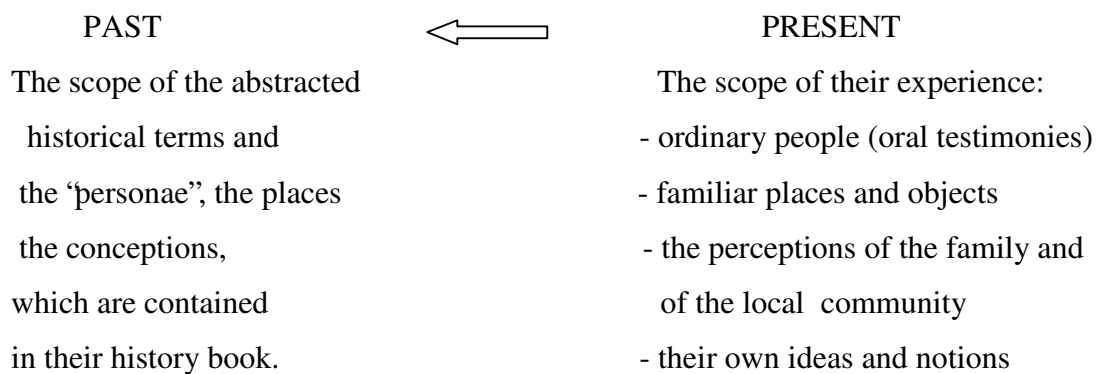


Fig.II: The use of the ordinary experience for the reconstruction of the past.

Very soon a kind of history workshop was set up in the school class. That was the first stage of the program. The students were encouraged to make suggestions about the oldness and the origin of the objects which were found in the school. They also compared

them as for the material by which they are constructed. Moreover, we turned over the pages of the old books and we read carefully some abstracts (Pict. I). They were written in purist Greek. A reasonable question which came up was that, “Who could use these books?” An indisputable answer was given when many students



Pict. I: Old school books

activated to bring similar objects which belong to their grandparents and other relatives or acquaintances, who had graduated from that school too. They should have also gathered information about the owner of each thing, how he/she acquired and then he/she used it. These written narrations were read aloud by the students and discussed in the class. Thus, the children concluded that the antiquated books, the old blue uniforms, the inkpot which had collected, command a voice, particularly their owner’s voice. Besides their objective value as materials they had also a personal meaning due to the distinct history which they carried. Even two identical objects could have a different value because of the completely different burden of experiences each one represented.

At this stage of the program the students noticed that some of the old objects which they found at school carried the names of their donors, and very prominent at that, such as members of great families in Hydra. That ascertainment motivated the children to collect more information about the history of the local community and its social and economic relation with the school. Accordingly, we addressed ourselves to the local Historical Museum and Archive. It was really considerable that some of the children hadn’t visited the local museum before.



Pict.II: The first Navy School of Hydra

such as the gospel, psalms and the breviary (**Ληγνός**, 164). The *second* period began when at the same location the Navy School of Hydra was established (Pict.II). According to the archives at that School taught Italian and Portuguese professors and many graduates had

As we ascertained the long history of our school, we discriminate the subject of our research in three periods –parts. In particular, the *first* period which extends from 1749 when the school was established by an eminent inhabitant of Hydra and then financially supported by many other outstanding people until 1780. The teachers were mostly priests and the books were ecclesiastical

fought then in naval battles during then Revolution period against Ottoman Turks (**Αργός**,168). Some descendants of these were still living at the island and the children made a catalogue with the names of the warrior, the family and the kinship. It could worth noticing that two of the children belonged to those families. The *third* period began in 1829 when a new, commodious school was founded by I.Kapodistrias, the first governor of Greece as an independent state and then the mutual teaching method was firstly applied (**Μαρίνης**,12). This period extended to the school years of their grandparents. The students collected much of this information during their visits at the local museum.

Moreover, according to the archives of school which were preserved at the Historical Museum and Archive of Hydra the students had the opportunity to see the catalogues, which comprised the names of school's old graduates. The children notated interesting information about the occupation of the inhabitants in the past. Most of them were seamen and the island based on the navigation and the trade. The family names which read in the catalogues were familiar and in some cases the same with those that children had now. So they motivated to find out former students and ask them for more information about the school.

As the program was based on the pedagogic method of the project, the students made two working groups for carrying out a profound research. The first one dealt with the first Navy School in Hydra, which had been established at the same place where the school is being located now. The second group engaged in the research of the old educational equipment. Besides the collection of the objects, the students made catalogues laying special emphasis on the date of their fabrication and the person who donated them to school. Both the first and the second working group searched for information in written or oral sources. They also kept notes about their activities in particular diaries. As for the oral evidence the students created a questionnaire which was applied to many members of the local community who had graduated from the same school. Our research was remarkably spread and many volunteers offered either new significant elements or new personal school equipment.

At the end of the program the students contributed to the organizing of an exhibition. Except for the gathering of the old educational equipment, either that which was found in schools or mainly that which was donated from the informants, they also created an audio guide. As for an exhibition hall we used our school class, which was modulated according to the descriptions of the former graduates. In that way we utilized the additional power of meaning which a real place could lend to an exhibition. Actually that was the third element

of our children oriented approach of the history, which included the real things and the real people too (Moore, p.142).

The children realized that history cannot only be written in books but also be discovered in the narrations of every day people. These narrations constitute our intangible heritage which should preserve too. Moreover, it was noticeable that history isn't exclusively related to the matters of the past in which a few historians are interested. It could also be related to common themes which concern all of us. Besides, the oral history research process could draw the interesting of the local community about an issue which otherwise would be remained untouched. Furthermore, the national history obtained a different meaning more understandable and accessible. It is worth noticing that considerable chapters of Greek history such as the Greek Revolution against Turkey in 1821 became conceivable even for the students who came from other countries. As they effectively participate in the project, they acquired a sense of belonging not only to the school team but also to the local community.

In general, children realized that the past is always being in an unbroken relation to the present. A potent joining ring between them could be the people who have the perquisite to have experienced both periods of time.

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