

# MUSEUM EDUCATION AS A TOOL FOR PROMOTING SCHOOL-WIDE COMMUNITY AND FAMILY COOPERATION IN ELEMENTARY: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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## **Abstract**

*Building relationships among students and their wider community may encourage participation and impact student learning. This study describes the implementation of a three-month model project in Museum Education in a primary school in a rural province of Crete. **Observational data of students** ( $N = 11$ ) and their parents (10 fathers and 10 mothers) focuses on: a) what extent students with different educational needs acquired new educational and interpersonal experiences by the investigation of the historical, cultural habits and customs of contemporary children and the children of Minoan civilization, and b) examining the notion of parents' participation in their children's educational and social school activities. It is indicated that the whole process encouraged student participation in class activities, achieved a more comfortable classroom environment, promoted collaboration with peers, their teacher and museum-educators and created a sense of community. Due to the children's maximum interest for the programme, parents in order to strengthen the access of such efforts, offered a further cooperation with the teacher and administrators of the program, as well as with other support services that led to the constitution of a parent-teacher association and the founding of a new library in their province.*

**Key words:** elementary students, family, museum educators, school-wide community cooperation.

## **Introduction**

Museum education like any other type of education, aims to stimulate the visitor's learning interests and lead to a tangible transformation of behaviours and attitudes (Nuzzaci, 2006). Teaching and learning in the museum is usually addressed to everyone despite the fact that visitors are individually different just as students are (Nuzzaci, 2004). For this reason the museum educational process has to be reinforced according to the needs of a certain public such as students who learn within a certain spatial and time dimension in relation to their particular cultural and social backgrounds (Shevlin, Kenny & McNeela, 2002). Within the school settings, theory and practice can bring students into play how research in particular can be combined together synergically through the work of museum professionals and the teacher. This will motivate the desire of students to learn as part of the set of cultural opportunities which everyone already uses (ICOM, 1972).

## **Theoretical Basis**

The implementation of Museum Education in elementary school could become an excellent tool for stimulating the students and such knowledge would act efficiently in situations which are often improvised in their nature (Frazer, 2004). Such education is considered to be stimulating for different types of learning interactions, from cognitive to social learning

(McManus, 1994). Moreover, Museum Education can offer students and especially those with various educational needs and behavioral singularities the possibility of not being regularly removed from their familiar school environment and becoming part of real life research with other members of their wider community (Beveridge, 2004; Terzi, 2005). Also, **the lack of pressure for school performance embedded though with a combination of a variety of active learning techniques, shows a significant advantage for all students to promote their learning capacities, develop creative thinking and social skills through participatory and recreational activities and arouse their curiosity and talents (Durbin, Morris & Wilkinson, 1992; Sameroff, 2000; Sameroff & Gutmann, 2004).** Finally, the active cooperation of museum educators and the teacher can encourage **the active and emotional involvement of parents in their children's school activities which emerges from the children's spontaneous enthusiasm during the course of the project (Miller, 2003; Albright & Weisberg, 2010; Reynolds & Shlafer, 2010).**

### **Description of the Museum Education Programme**

The present study took place in an elementary school in a rural province of Crete, Greece, during the school year 2009-2010 and the results are based on participatory observation, students' as well as brief conversations with parents and personal work. The teacher in cooperation with the administrator of the national museum in the city of Rethymnon, designed an educational programme as an alternative strategy for 11 elementary students (7 boys and 4 girls) from rural backgrounds (Epstein, 2001; Tolan & Woo, 2010). **Museum educators visited the school once every 15 days for almost 3 months (a total of 5 visits).** The first 4 visits were undertaken by the museum educators held at the school and the last one was the teacher, pupils and their parents turn to visit the museum. **The program included various in school-activities (e.g. role-playing, expression through art, creative writing etc.) as well as out-of-school ones, such as games inspired from the archaic years, visits in the countryside and plans made for the proposed lending library.**

More analytically, the museum education program was developed in 5 phases which consisted of (Gavrilaki, 2008, 2010):

a) Presentation of photographic material and discussions **between children and museum administrators on how children imagined people's everyday living and objects of that particular time.**

b) Storytelling and role-playing which developed children's interest and fantasy, encouraging them to think about and understand concepts relating to Minoan children's everyday living routines to their own.

c) Out-of- school activities, such as walking in the countryside and playing games. For example, **the game of excavation helped students observe natural situations and under the guidance of a professional how archaeologists "unlock" the past and bring it into present.**

d) **The last two meetings were dedicated to the preparation of the children for a visit to the archeological museum as well as to school-family, museum educators and community volunteers collaborations for the establishment of the proposed library of historical books in the first place.**

e) Finally, **the last meeting was carried out at the archeological museum of Rethymnon.** There pupils were guided to the museum antiquities, made **artworks and had discussions about Minoan civilization with the museum educators. An evaluation of the whole effort took place with the participants and the organizers of the program too.** It is worth mentioning that at the closure of the program there was a public celebration, where parents, students, educators and community volunteers expressed their feelings about their participation in the program and celebrated the opening of their local lending library.

## General Background of the Research

The museum education program was designed to highlight to students the cultural and social dimension of similarities and differences between them and the children of Minoan civilization, by motivating students' curiosity for learning through the exploitation of the identity of each person (ICOM, 1972). Moreover, the cooperation of parents with their children was regarded an important element in order to make Museum Education a useful interactive part of their lives in the particular elementary school of Crete. So, the methodology applied aimed at enabling the students to become active participants in an **interactive learning strategy** plan progressively in their own learning environments (Reynolds & Schlafer, 2010). This was achieved through the implementation of four common paths: motivation, personal developmental abilities, social relationships and school-family communication.

Furthermore, Museum Education program was implemented under the elementary teacher's supervision who had already worked for a year on regular basis with these particular students and had a comprehensive knowledge of the learning attitudes, beliefs, skills and behavioural patterns that were critical to their learning and school adjustment (Kaiser & Stainbrook, 2010). Despite, the co-existence of students with and no special educational needs, the school facilities and didactic methodology were not structured to promote the appropriate inclusive education for the last 6 children. It was the teacher's effort and motives to establish a working base for the co-operation of all students on an equal basis (Bandura, 1997; Liarakou, 2002). So, the participation of pupils with and no particular educational needs in the Museum Education program proved beneficial as it strengthen their communication and interpersonal skills and their cooperating learning abilities (Katz & Bushnell, 1979; Maruschak, 1997; Nuzzaci, 2006; **Filippaki & Kalatsidaki, 2011**).

Regarding the various learning styles and the educational characteristics of the students as well as that none of them had participated before in activities involving Museum Education, the goals set from the implementation of the museum education program in the particular elementary school were:

- a) To motivate students' desire to learn about Minoan Culture as part of the set of their cultural profiles and opportunities which everyone already uses.
- b) To produce effective teaching capable of agreeing on a functional relationship between the students' various learning experiences and cultural environments.
- c) To stimulate pupils' behaviour which centre their action mostly on the emotional rather than at the cognitive level.
- d) To encourage interactions among children, their families and other members of the community.

Finally, the significance of this study lies in pointing to the fundamental need of teachers to be prepared for engaging seriously with issues and tasks involving knowledge, skills, time and resources required for the development and functioning of family-school collaborations. Furthermore, the present study emphasizes the need for training or giving directions to elementary teachers for the promotion of **school-wide community and family cooperation** issues as influential contributors to students' cognitive and interpersonal development.

### *Methodology*

Field study was adopted as a methodology tool during the implementation of the Museum Education program. The particular method was useful since the students were offered ample opportunity for active participation either in groups or independently to plan, implement, apply, re-plan and evaluate certain activities during their participation in the program. Also, field work

allowed parents to observe the students' performance during their participation in activities presented by the museum educators as well as to acquire in situ experience and knowledge for their children's cognitive and interpersonal experiences through the process of the program (Kern & Carpenter, 1984; Moles, 1988). A journal on all program activities as well as pupils' and their parents' social interactions, their willingness to participate in an activity on his/her own accord or following the educators' suggestion was also kept by the teacher (Filippaki & Kalatsidaki, 2011). Finally, field notes were kept by the teacher either discreetly during participant observation or following a specific activity of pupils.

During the implementation of Museum Education, the teacher remained the main observer of the students' performance. Every observation consisted of 90 minutes during each phase of the program. The observation record consisted different types of activities during the implementation of each phase of the Museum Education program, the level of children's engagement and the involvement of other adults and students' parents. Specifically, episodes of use mainly involved a group of students interacting with peers or with Museum Educators, a child alone, some adult-child interactions, or a combination of these. The observation record also included the number of adults and students present in the setting and the ways in which the participants were deployed. Records developed during rather than after the data gathering session.

Furthermore, evidence was drawn by recorded discussions between the teacher and the students regarding their impressions and experiences after the end of each session of the program. Also, parents were informally interviewed regarding their participation in the educational life of their children (DeWalt, DeWalt & Wayland, 1998). Notes were always kept by the teacher during brief conversations among parents, the teacher, museum educators and other community volunteers which took place immediately before or after the observation sessions. All conversations with children, parents and community volunteers were of necessity unstructured, informal, brief and opportunistic.

Finally, 4 basic aspects guided our data collection:

- a) Museum Education is a new tool that can motivate students' desire to learn about their traditional history.
- b) Museum Education can help children make certain historical events become a part of the set of their cultural profiles.
- c) Children's and parents' reactions in the new educational demands at school and generally in society.
- d) Parents' perspective to cooperate with their children in order to make Museum Education a useful educational and interactive part of their lives.

### *Participants*

Museum education program was designed exclusively for 11 primary students. Five students (4 girls and 1 boy) had no particular educational needs in contrast to the other 6 boys, aged 8 to 11, who had mild mental retardation, developmental disorders and learning difficulties. Participants in this study were also the parents of the students (10 mothers and 10 fathers). At the time of the study, the students' age ranged from 6 to 11 years old.

### **Results of Research**

Given that the work described above is not a controlled experiment but a set of qualitative observations concerning the educational changes in a conventional learning environment from traditional cultural backgrounds, the key observations from this study were as follows:

1. Promoted highly structured teaching strategies and effective learning techniques exclusively for all pupils participating in the Museum Education program.
2. Improved the quality of the environment in which students were educated.
3. Created an accepting and supportive classroom climate between pupils with and no educational needs and promoted social and emotional skills among peers.
4. Involved parents.
5. Established commitment and attachment among educators, parents and community volunteers.

Regarding the first aspect of observation, students showed **active participation in the program, a generating enthusiasm, commitment and involvement**. In other words, the knowledge of the Minoan past generated easily as a part of the students' pedagogical experiences and practices in their familiar educational and cultural domains. As a result, this had a positive effect on their engagement, participation and achievement in learning. For example, regarding the coordinated strategies performed during the implementation of the program one student reported: "*Careful preparation and planning of the educators gave students the opportunity to work as a team*". Two other students reported: "*Lessons with museum educators were full of learning surprises which resulted to a sense that the student could control the whole process*".

Concerning, the pedagogic approaches that have occurred in the present elementary school, Museum Education program appeared to have changed successfully the way of teaching history from conventional to non conventional and modern. Observation process showed student encouragement and participation in class. Also, outdoor activities, created a more comfortable classroom environment, and clarified course expectations. Most of the students stated that Museum Education offered them serious knowledge to cover the historical events concerning Minoan Civilization. Moreover, the following statements of students are extracted from the diary kept by the researcher: "*Museum Education is useful because it is an experiencing technique. It studies what is happening at the moment and the place it is happening. All senses are involved*" or "*We (pupils) are willing to participate in similar educational programs as they are very useful*" or "*...the student gets out of the house and observes the theory becoming practice*", or "*Museum Education is helpful in acquiring knowledge and skills as well as applying such knowledge in practice*". It is worth taking note that all children stated that they enjoyed their participation in the program and they were sad when it ended.

In addition, observational reports showed that the implementation of Museum Education worked as a tool for positive socialization experiences among students, effective enough to support relationships despite the children's particular educational needs and behavioural singularities. Several students specifically credited the whole process of the program with promoting "*collaboration with peers*" and "*creating a sense of community*". They also indicated they appreciated the chance to "*get to know better their classroom mates*" as well as the "*museum educators' concern for all student opinions*". Gradually, students started to progressively use adjectives such as "*Companionship*", "*Friendship*", "*Gained experiences*", obviously referring to the positive interactions among peers and other components of the program.

Regarding the parents' views of **their participation in the program, all 20 parents (mothers and fathers)** expressed lots of enthusiasm for becoming a part of the Museum Education program. Moreover, they stated that they learnt how to spend better quantity and quality of time with their children as well as how to share new learning experiences with them. Additionally, the parents positive attitude to be involved in their children's activities and frequently visit the school had a direct affect to the strengthening of parents-educators communication and collaborations. This was evident in the students' statements such as "*Museum Education made us learn more about our origins and so ourselves*", "*I experienced cooperation techniques watching the elderly fellows (meaning her mother with the teacher and the rest participants) and felt good*", "*I think*

*I will love and respect my family more after all”, “I’m proud of my ancestors, I’m proud of my self”, etc.*

Finally, the program of Museum Education managed to further involve the parents and other persons in their local community in the founding of a new library in their village. This was also a factor in the mind of the administrator of Museum Education program, who arranged the contacts with a community association and inspired parents’ interest in establishing their lending library. Such a venture had finally proved effective in establishing a positive, happy relationships with parents, other residents and the community at large. On the other hand, not only the students of the present school but other out-of-school children showed readiness to also be engaged in such a venture. The children’s response and enthusiasm has undoubtedly provided a secure foundation for launching the library’s development.

## Discussion

The present article presents the attitudinal consequences of the introduction of Museum Education collaborative learning activities among students, parents and the wider community in a rural province of Greece. Particularly, the developmental effectiveness of improvements in both school and home learning context were concentrated on the following aspects: a) children experienced quality education within and outside the school context and, in turn b) both parents and students experienced the establishment of positive home-school relationships (Okagaki & Bingham, 2010).

Right from the beginning, the implementation of a Museum Education program in the particular traditional elementary school of Crete successfully gained the students’ interest in exploring Minoan Civilization despite their educational and interpersonal diversities (Katz & Bushnell, 1979; Maruschak, 1997; Nuzzaci, 2006; Filippaki & Kalatsidaki, 2011). In particular, the Museum Education program enabled pupils to control their own progress with their learning tasks, to adjust their personal learning abilities as appropriate for different tasks, to assume responsibility for their personal learning and to identify points at which cognitive and social knowledge will be best served by accessing other’s help and guidance (teacher-museum educators-parents and community volunteers involvement) (Stipek & Gralinski, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker, Ice, 2010).

As a result, pupils developed the need to know, which first sparked interest, then curiosity or creativity and then stimulated their research, leading to an understanding of the lives of Minoan people (the urban, the rural, poor and rich, people and children, etc.). This was even more evident when during the pupils’ last visit in the Archeological Museum of Rethymnon, children seemed very comfortable with their surroundings and acted as if they were visiting a very familiar place. Indeed, the fortuitous encounter with pupils from other schools (who were not involved in similar programs of Museum Education) showed that all 11 students acted as genuine hosts. Most ancient artifacts in the museum seemed familiar to the pupils. Specifically, a brief review of the Minoan civilization from museum educators became instantly comprehensible from students, who described the museum as a place of real enlightenment and entertainment and not as a traditional place with inanimate objects.

Furthermore, Museum Education offered both children with and without special educational needs the chance to acquire active learning abilities either from games and role playing or from exploring things and objects related to the Minoan civilization. Especially for pupils experiencing educational as well as emotional difficulties, Museum Education turned successful at promoting school achievement, commitment, bonding with peers and educators, and reducing misbehaviour (Hawkins, Farrington, Catalano, 1999).

Luckily, the students’ enthusiasm for the program encouraged parents’ active engagement with their children in support of school activities (Hoover-Dempsey, Battiatto,

Walker, Reed, DeJong, Jones, 2001; Miller, 2003; Albright & Weisberg, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker, Ice, 2010; Reinolds & Schlafer, 2010). Regarding the last initiative, both parents and educators gained a better understanding of pupils' experiences and behaviors, which consequently led students to demonstrate competency, confidence and enthusiasm across their school curriculum (Albright & Weissberg, 2010; Dearing & Tag, 2010; Tolan & Woo, 2010). This initiative ignited organized meetings among parents, the teacher and school administrators and community volunteers which finally led to the constitution of a parents' association and the construction of a lending library for the children and the local inhabitants of their province (Tolan & Woo, 2010).

This study is subject to several limitations: first, the present sample is small in scale and there may be other variables that need to be included for study. Second, the research data was derived only from observational data and informal interviews. A richer data set could be based on a more regular basis naturalistic and longitudinal observation of students', teachers' and parents' involvement in various educational and recreational class activities and focus groups. Certainly more research is needed to understand how parents' cultural backgrounds, education and personal experience as caregivers influence their beliefs and quality of communication with teachers as well as their involvement in their children's school activities and needs (Okagaki & Bingham, 2010).

## Conclusions

This study presented the manner in which the implementation of the program of Museum Education in a traditional school of Greece, provided both pupils and their families educational opportunities as well as new collaborative and interactive experiences. The development of such relationships among parents, educators and community members showed that it could have long lasting effects on pupils' pedagogical and psychosocial development. For example, parents' sensitiveness and responsiveness to their children's experiences and needs supported pupils' efforts for cognitive and social development and achievement, and were encouraged to explore their worlds and engage in stimulating interactions with others without having to be removed from their familiar school surroundings. Especially parents, the school teacher and museum educators finally developed relationships of trust and mutual respect. This empowered families to become leaders both at school by means of the parent association and in their community by founding a local lending library in collaboration with community volunteers. This positive outcome emphasizes the need to provide such opportunities for both pupils and their families from rural and distant elementary schools to collaborate and to interact in an educational and social context as soon as possible. Though for the successful implementation of such programs in rural and distant elementary schools, it is strongly recommended that a careful design of the goals of the program and for the school to carefully assess the cultural dimensions and diversities of the families participating in it. The effect of a joint Museum Education program on students (with and without educational needs) self-esteem as well as parents' personal motivators and expectations for their role one is to play as a member of the school system in now being further and more systematically investigated.

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