The development of a teaching strategy for health and citizenship education for secondary school pupils, based upon the values they see in their life, in Belarus, the Netherlands and Ukraine

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Abstract

The conceptions of 12 – 14 year old secondary school pupils about their life in Belarus, the Netherlands and Ukraine can be classified into about ten themes of life. These themes are used for the construction of a card game (‘kwartetten’ in Dutch). In this card game, four cards give each an example of a situation in a theme of life, e.g. health. Another set of four cards depict four aspects of family life, another of love etc. Pupils play in groups and try to assemble as much as possible combinations of four cards about a theme. The winner has the most sets of four coherent cards. Before and after the playing of the game pupils give a priority in ranking of the themes of life in the game and discuss their choices. The outcomes are used to describe the developments in thinking of the pupils valueing the themes of life.

A comparison between the three countries is made and perspectives for international cooperation between pupils and teachers are discussed.

Introduction

The increase of HIV/AIDS infections in the Ukrainian, Russian and Belarusian regions around Tsjernobyl is now faster than even in Africa. These regions in Eastern Europe are among the poorest of their countries, suffering an economic and social breakdown for many years since the nuclear disaster in 1986. The origin of the explosion of HIV/AIDS in Belarus is found among the heroine addicts in the South-Eastern region Gomel, spreading infections via the repeated use of non sterilized needles by many different persons. In addition to this, the increase of infections of HIV was and is accelerated by unsafe sexual behaviour. Connecting regions in Ukraine and Russia suffer in the same way.

Prevention is paramount to securing a healthy future. In the past students and teachers from INHOLLAND university have been engaged in several healthy-way-of-life studies in schools in Belarus. These studies concentrated on the investigation of student’s ideas prior to teaching
about issues such as food, drugs, alcohol and AIDS. Outcomes were used for the development of lesson materials which took the ideas found into account, thus drawing students via their own perceptions into a communicative discourse about the decisions they can take about their own health (Kievits et al., 1998).

In the Netherlands, preventive school programs about HIV/AIDS are embedded into general lesson series about STD’s (sexual transmissible diseases) and are part of the national curriculum. The general message here communicated is that you at the personal level have to decide upon having sexual contact or not. If you decide to do so, you have to use a condom for a healthy lifestyle. A religious minority like the Roman Catholic church in the Netherlands is officially against this approach but the majority of the population, including most of the church members do not share this objection. Not much is known about the attitude and behaviour of the great number of ethnic minorities in Holland on this issue.

In Belarus and Ukraine the approach is different. HIV/AIDS is not a topic in the school curriculum. Instead, each school has received one leaflet about HIV/AIDS its origins and dangers, some years ago. Teachers are free how and to what extent they lecture about this issue. Moreover, in this spring the president of Belarus has sent a direct order to all school directors to forbid the use of the words like ‘sex’ and ‘condoms’ in school classes. The very dominant Russian Orthodox church holds a comparative opinion and orders for sexual abstinence up until one is legally married.

We decided to develop a communication strategy about a healthy way of life for 14-16 year old students that should include valid ideas of these students about their life and that should evoke discussions about personal decisions about their (non)sexual behaviour and relations with their environment via a card game based upon the pupils’ original ideas about their life.. We did the inventories in schools in the Netherlands, Ukraine and in Belarus.

The main aim of this investigation was: To get a valid view of the attitude and knowledge of students in Belarus, Ukraine and the Netherlands concerning their life.. In order to develop a communication strategy and a prevention method, which can be used in a manner that is both effective, as well as in accordance with the society’s standards.

**Methods**

The research started with researching the social, cultural and scientific situation in Belarus, Ukraine and the Netherlands in the literature.
Then we investigated the students’ ideas about their life via a hierarchical Concept-mapping tests (Brinkman et al., 1988) to obtain pre-instructional ideas of pupils about health . The procedure included the following steps:

a. Collecting associations (5 – 10 minutes) Pupils were asked to individually write down words that they connect with the subject of ‘your life’.

b. Clustering of associations into groups (5 – 10 minutes) Pupils were asked to arrange their associations into what in their opinion are coherent groups.

c. Name giving and structuring (5 – 10) minutes. Pupils were asked to give a title to each of their coherent groups of associations and describe the relation of each title with the subject ‘your life’.

d. Drawing a picture on the subject of ‘your life’ (5 – 10 minutes)
Using the results of these surveys, guidelines for designing a strategy and method of education were made in the form of a card game to evoke class discussions as is reported here.

Finally the effects of this strategy were evaluated by a post test about life situations as included in the card game.

The target group existed of pupils from 12 till 15 years old students, from Amsterdam, Kiev and Minsk. The amount of male and female pupils was closely the same.

The research was done in the Netherlands (Amsterdam and surroundings) as well as in Belarus (Minsk) and Ukraine (Kiev).

Results

Socio-economic and cultural aspects
Data from literature about the cultural, social and scientific situation, which had to do with AIDS-prevention and health, have been inventoried in both countries. Different aspects where important in those countries. For example in Belarus, the social and economic insecurities influence children in their sexual behaviour. Because of their negative concept of what their future will look like, the social moral is very low and children show high-risk sexual behaviour. (Coker et al, 2004) Also, the strong direction from the government on education is very important for AIDS-prevention. (Brinkman, F 1998) In the Netherlands the media have a big influence on children’s sexual behaviour, such as Internet, music videos and movies. (Kalma et al 2003) We also have to think about the different cultures in big cities such as Amsterdam. Children with different backgrounds and religions, have different opinions about these subjects. Besides, many foreign children feel cast out of the Dutch society after all the things that happened the last couple of years. Different communities don’t tolerate each other’s values anymore. This also influences aids prevention and health education. (Leupen (2005).

Preconceptions about ‘your life’
An inventory of the student’s ideas about ‘your life’ was made. This pre-investigation gave some remarkable results in the three countries. The associations from the HC test could be categorized into ten general themes: free time, sport, family and friends, nature, future, education, health, society, love and attitude in life. The frequency in the various countries varied as can be seen in the top four frequently mentioned examples per country in the tables 1.

Table 1: Belarus: Most frequently made associations and examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1.</th>
<th>Hobbies and entertainment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example: going fine outside, playing, walking with friends is fun(boy,15)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2.</th>
<th>Family is important in life.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example: I love my parents and spent much time with them. (Girl 14)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
3. **Attitude in life**
   Example: I want peace in the world and no bad things. (Boy, 16)

4. **Education and future**
   Example: learning, without school I should be nothing (Boy, 14)

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**Table 1: Ukraine: Most frequently made associations and examples.**

1. **Education**
   Example: school and education are important in my life (boy, 15)

2. **Family**
   Example: I sing with my family and play piano with them. (Girl 14)

3. **Hobbies**
   Example: hobbies make my life interesting. (Boy, 16)

4. **Friends**
   Example: my best friends support me every minute (Girl, 14)

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**Table 1: The Netherlands. Most frequently made associations and examples.**

1. **Free time**
   Example: life without holidays is life in the stone age (Boy, 14)

2. **Family and friends**
   Example: I cannot without mom, dad brother family, Hannah and Genevieve (Girl, 15)

3. **Future.**
   Example: When I become 25 years I have a life, the life of an adult. (girl, 16)

4. **Education.**
   Example: the learning process and the scientific field is the basis of my life (boy, 15)

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This concept mapping test shows that the ideas about *your life* are partly similar and partly different in Belarus, Ukraine and in the Netherlands. In Belarus, little is mentioned about health and nature, although one boy explicitly mentioned radioactive fall-out and the danger of it.
Girls mentioned almost no personal care, boys did not mention sport so much. Dominant were school and future and love including relations.

I like boys very much I like to give love but often it gives me a painful feeling says a girl (15) about it.

The music aspect in the free time category is interesting:
Nirvana has a great influence on my ideology (boy, 16)

On the attitude in life topic, boys give negative descriptions:
I am a warrior for a free Belarus (boy, 14) and
I hate my life, I hate this world, our society (boy 15)
are examples of negative statements they make here.

One example of the contrary:
I am proud of my country, and my people (boy, 13)

which indicates how the indoctrination in this undemocratic state fails and is successful. Teachers are not present in the associations of Belarusian pupils.

In the Ukraine, no personal care and attitudes in life, like religion are mentioned. Dominant are education, and future statements:
School is the basis of my life, my future depends on it ((boy, 14) and
I am hooked on discos, in the summer I prefer the sea, especially at night with a girl. (boy,15)

It is the only country where teachers are mentioned:
School gives us knowledge, our teacher helps us with it (girl, 13)

Some political attitudes in life remarks are made:
School is the basis but the system has to changed (girl, 14)

In the Netherlands no remarks about nature and a very small number about health are found. Many statements about free time, family and future are given:
Watching TV and gaming on my computer are my favourites (boy, 13)

Religious attitudes in life are mentioned by ethnic minority pupils only:
Islam is my religion and Mohammed is the prophet of islam and Mekka is the most important place (girl,14).

Relations and love came forward in very small amounts of statements. Only once sex was mentioned.

No teachers are mentioned!

Designing a communication and education strategy.

Using the results of this study and of previous research of ideas among children (Brinkman, 1990) and teachers and the outcomes on literature, we have developed guidelines for designing a method of communication and education. Some of these guidelines are:

- Any method of education has to be in compliance with the strict rules and laws of the Belarusian government
- It has to take into account the taboo that still surrounds the subject of AIDS
- It has to be planned into the very tight schedules of schools and teachers.
- The design has to take into account the three parts of good education: Focus on feelings and emotions, peer pressure and cultural expectations
We included also the main results from the preconception tests:

- The associations made with the topic *your life* from Belarusian, Ukrainian and Dutch schoolchildren are more common than different from each other. We used the ten themes as described above for the development of a common educational game.
- The role of sexuality within school children’s ideas about your life is absent. This is the case in Belarus, Ukraine as well as in the Netherlands.
- AIDS-prevention methods aimed at relationships causes a small gain of associations with sexuality in children’s ideas about health in both countries.
- Children in Belarus, Ukraine and the Netherlands can be taught about AIDS prevention by a method aimed at relationships, values in life, decision making in life situations and making wishes and boundaries clear.

**The Design**

We have chosen a card game-type method of education called in Dutch ‘kwartetten’. Based upon statements of pupils and upon data from literature, quartets of playing cards are made. The ten themes delivered so each four cards with on each card a topic from the theme with an explanatory quotation.

In the game, the forty resulting cards are distributed over 5 to 6 pupils in a random way. The aim of the game is for each pupil to obtain as much complete quartets as is possible, by asking to other group members the cards they miss by reading the theme and the missing topic. A negative answer gives the turn to the next pupil.

Its goal is to teach children about boundaries and how to set them for yourself and others by organizing a prestructured dialogue on forty topics about their life.

**Evaluation**

The game was used in the three countries and was included between a pre and post test about the ten themes, to see what the influence of the intervention was.

The test asked pupils to make a top 5 out of the ten themes offered before the game and after it. The pre-test was made individually; the post-test was made individually too, but after the game and after a group discussion about the separate themes in the game and the quotations on the cards. In addition questions about what influence the game had, which theme was less known about and on which theme more information was needed were answered.

The outcomes of the pre-test show that in all countries the top 5 consisted of the themes *family and friends, future, education, health and love*, be it in sometimes a slight change in the ranking per country..

Themes as *nature, society and attitudes in life* rank very low.

40% of the pupils indicated that their top 5 had changed after the game and the discussion.

60% said not to have changed.

This resulted in general into a change in the ranking of the top 5 from the pretest, but not in the top 3; *family and friends, health and education*.

It was learned that after doing the card game all pupils with the exception of those in Ukraine, said to know most of the theme family and friends. The theme attitude of life is the most unknown in all countries. This theme scores high on the need for more information.

In Belarus and Ukraine the knowledge of society and the need for more information is high in ranking. In this theme, topics as religion, freedom of opinion, homeland and multicultural society are included. It is suggested that in these countries such topics are not seen as self
evident, not in an undemocratic Belarus and not in a post-orange revolutionary situation in Ukraine.

All pupils in all countries judged the game as interesting. Only one pupil per country thought otherwise with comments like *not useful* or *stupid game*.

In conclusion we want to recommend that the card game exercise is implemented in schools, together with an educational method, which focuses on increasing knowledge. This would preferably be an educational video of some kind. In the event that choices have to be made to cut the length of the classes, then we would recommend using the card game alone as it has the most possibilities for interaction and retains a good balance between being clear and open about the subject, and not being too controversial.

The possibilities for international co-operation of pupils and teachers for instance competitive gaming via internet offers a perspective for future developments.

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**References**


