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FLOATING ON THE DEAD SEA: CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE IN A CROSS-CULTURAL PROJECT

This article examines a cross-cultural communication experience that 5th grade students in the United States and Israel engaged in during one academic year, focusing on the experiences and perceptions of the American students. Although the American teacher attempted to create a broad enrichment experience for the students, this project fell short of the goal of intercultural communication in order to promote tolerance. This paper examines teacher and student experiences and perceptions to determine what the American students learned from the experience and how to create more interaction to facilitate student learning at a deeper level.

1. CONSTRUCTIVISM AND TOLERANCE

Constructivist theory suggests that learners actually construct knowledge by comparing new information to their previous constructs and create new knowledge by interweaving the old and the new[1]. In addition, some theorists

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[1] T. D u f f y, D. C u n n i n g h a m, *Constructivism: Implications for the design and delivery of instruction*, in: *The Handbook of Research for Educational Communications and*

such as Lev Vygotski and Mihail Bakhtin[2] assert that learning does not go on in a social vacuum. Learning is constructed through interaction and engagement with the material and with others. In a constructivist classroom, the teacher is a facilitator and guide helping create and facilitate these interactions rather than being an imparter of knowledge, an arbiter of expertise.

Looked at in this way, it is evident that knowledge and gaining knowledge can take many forms. In this case we will look at the construction of knowledge regarding what is generally called "tolerance". In literature about diversity and diversity training there are various schemata used to explain how people learn about respect, tolerance, and appreciation of diversity. A survey of the literature[3] indicates the complexity, and even contradictions about how to teach about diversity, and how to implement it, and reveal an array of approaches to teaching about it.

Bruner asserted that culture shapes the mind and how "we construct our very conception of our selves"[4]. This cultural construct of self-conception

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Technology, 2001. http://www.aect.org/intranet/publications/edtech/07/index.html [retrieved 10.07.2008]; E. S t r o m m e n, Technology and the future of classroom learning. Children's Television Workshop Bruce Lincoln, Bank Street College of Education 1991. http://web.archive.org/web/20010617134028/www.ic.polyu.edu.hk/posh97/Student/Learn/Learning_theories.html [retrieved 10.07.2008].

[2] D u f f y, C u n n i n g h a m, *Constructivism: Implications for the design and delivery of instruction*; L. K a g a n, S. K a g a n, *Cooperative learning: Course workbook*, San Clemente: Kagan Cooperative Learning 2000.

[3] J. B a n k s, *Teaching strategies for ethnic studies*, Boston: Allyn-Bacon 2008; C. B e n n e t t, *Comprehensive multicultural education: Theory and practice*, Boston: Allyn-Bacon 2010; P. B r u c h, R. J e h a n g i r, W. J a c o b s, D. G h e r e, *Enabling access: Toward multicultural developmental curriculum*, "Journal of Developmental Education" 2004, No. 27, p. 12-14, 16-19, 41; R.P. S o l o m o n, C. L e v i n e - R a s k y, *Teaching for equity and diversity: Research to practice*, Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press 2003; D.M. G o l l n i c k, P.C. C h i n n, *Multicultural education in a pluralistic society*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall 2008; C. G r a n t, M.L. G o m e z, *Campus and Classroom: making schooling multicultural*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall 2001; H. H e r n a n d e z, *Multicultural education: A teacher's guide to linking context, process, and content*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall 2001; S. N i e t o, *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*, New York: Allyn-Bacon 2011; C. S l e e t e r, C. G r a n t, *Making choices for multicultural education: Five approaches to race, class, and gender*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall 2009; P. T i e d t, I. T i e d t, *Multicultural teaching: A handbook of activities, information, and resources*, Boston 2005.

[4] J. B r u n e r, *The culture of education*, Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press 1996, p. x.

is supported by Banks who also emphasizes the importance of teachers being culturally competent[5]. The communication and learning styles of students from minority cultures may differ from that of their teacher leading to conflicts with teachers and peers. An incomplete understanding of these differences can also lead to low academic achievement and inappropriate behavior in the classroom.

Many organizations, including schools, which focus on teaching about diversity issues use a framework which identifies stages that people go through. The models vary but most begin with a stage of little or no awareness of differences, to awareness, then stages of denial, acceptance, understanding and appreciation of differences. These stages involve learning not just on the cognitive, but also the affective level – what we think about other people is also influenced by how we feel about them. In a constructivist classroom, there is the potential for moving the students through these various stages as students construct meaning which involves the combining of cognitive and affective knowledge.

For example, DeRosa and Johnson presented a model which they called 10Cs,

> a two-part model that includes the 5 Cs of Awareness and the 5 Cs of Change. The 5 Cs of Awareness are: Color, Culture, Class, Character, and Context. The 5 Cs of Change are: Confidence, Courage, Commitment, Conflict, and Community[6].

They assert that to effect change, individuals must start by examining themselves – who they are, and their experiences and perceptions. Once self-knowledge is attained, then they can move toward transformation of themselves and society at large. This framework has been used by teachers to create conflict resolution curricula, as well as shape classroom activities and assignments for "exploring literature that deals with cultural conflict and change"[7] so that students can construct knowledge about diversity issues in a way that is relevant and meaningful for them.

A well-designed project can help students construct knowledge. Collaboration in programs such as the Twinning Project provides students with an

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[5] B a n k s, *Teaching strategies for ethnic studies.*

[6] P. D e R o s a, U. J o h n s o n, *The 10Cs: A model of diversity awareness and social change*, 2003. http://www.lesley.edu/academic_centers/peace/content/10cs.pdf, p. 2.

[7] D e R o s a, J o h n s o n, *The 10Cs: A model of diversity awareness and social change*, p. 10.

authentic cross-cultural enrichment activity which also requires "them to use knowledge and skills related to many different areas of the curriculum"[8]. Using authentic tasks such as this for writing and communicating with others can increase student interest and motivation, and facilitate problem solving while supporting "critical thinking in written language acquisition and the social nature of learning is evident in the correspondence"[9]. These skills can be incorporated into activities which also help students explore the cross--cultural aspects of the activities at more than a superficial level.

2. THE TWINNING PROJECT

The Twinning Project was developed by Partnership 2000 of The Central Area Consortium and Western Galilee. Based on the Educational Twinning Program, the project involves "over sixty (60) pairs of teachers and students in elementary, middle and high school classrooms"[10] in the Western Galilee region of Israel and across the United States. The project's goal is to engage two groups of students and teachers, separated by distance, time, language, learning skills, culture, and social background in joint learning activities, and, subsequently, to exchange information about one another's schools and cultures. The aim of Twinning projects are to develop collaborative programs which are "joint learning activities," activities which are inquiry- and problem-based, which will facilitate teachers' and students' development of "an understanding and appreciation of diversity which can replace a simple tolerant acceptance of others"[11].

This particular project originated at this school, which will be called ABC Elementary School, in a small Midwestern town in the United States when the teacher and principal agreed to participate in a cross-cultural Twinning

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[8] BBC, *World class project twinning guide*, 2005. http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/communicate/worldclass/pdfs/wc_twins.pdf, p. 4 [retrieved 1.12.2007].

[9] N. C h a r r o n, *I learned that there's a state called Victoria and he has six blue-tongued lizards!*, 2007. http://www.in2books.com/downloads/Reading_Teacher_article_2.pdf [retrieved 10.07.2008].

[10] Jewish Agency for Israel, *Partnership 2000 (P2K) and the Jewish Agency for Israel*, 2005. http://www.westerngalilee.org.il/JewishAgency/English/Israel/Partnerships/Regions/WesternGalilee/About+Us, p. 2 [retrieved 3.05.2007].

[11] Jewish Agency for Israel, *Partnership 2000 (P2K) and the Jewish Agency for Israel*, p. 3.

Project between their 5th grade students and students at an elementary school in northern Israel following a face-to-face meeting between the teacher at ABC and the teacher in Israel. This group of students was chosen because they were part of the High Ability Program Resource Program. District and school administrators decided that since these students were already participating in a flexible curriculum pull-out program, they could most easily participate in the project and would benefit the most from it. The High Ability Resource Program at ABC Elementary has evolved over several years from an enrichment pull-out program to an accelerated curriculum-based model with daily classes. According to the teacher of this class, the goal of the resource model used in this school is to provide in-depth learning experiences for students of high ability by emphasizing the connections, patterns, and concepts necessary for comprehensive learning. Thinking, questioning, and creativity are encouraged.

During the spring, the 5th grade teacher from Israel and the Israeli coordinator met the American teacher in Indiana. The teachers decided that since the Israeli students, who study English as a Foreign Language, would have difficulty communicating effectively with the American students, they would focus on non-verbal types of interactions and communication, such as art projects and music. They did decide on an initial exchange of letters so that the students could learn something about one another as individuals. Plans for a more substantial joint activity were not discussed at this point.

As the school year got under way that fall, the American teacher decided to broaden the experience by inviting guest speakers to give her students more information about Israel and life in Israel. She also required the students to create a journal in which they recorded their thoughts and feelings about each activity. When approached about having the students participate in a research project related to the project, she readily agreed.

3. METHOD

The research project design, which included questionnaires, interview questions, and appropriate consent forms for parents and children, was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. This article analyzes and assesses this project by examining the perspectives of the teacher and the students who participated, and how it fell short of the goal of constructing

a deeper understanding and appreciation of diversity among the American students.

This mixed method research project used a variety of sources to collect data. Although both groups of students and teachers completed questionnaires, this research report focuses on the perceptions of the students and teacher in the school in the U.S. and uses data from three sources: questionnaires which asked open and closed form questions about the Twinning Project and related activities; journal entries that student completed at the conclusion of each activity; and a group discussion at the completion of the project which was video-taped. Some data were also gathered from questionnaires completed by and email communications from the teacher and principal at the school in the U.S. The combination of these various narrative forms helped track the progress of the project, and helped in understanding how the students perceived each activity.

4. THE PARTICIPANTS

The participants in the project and in the study were the principal and teacher, as well as eleven 5th graders in the High Ability Resource Program. There were 16 students who participated in the Twinning Project/Israel activities. However, five parents/caregivers declined to give permission for their students to participate in the study. The data for the students is based on the results of data collection from eleven participants for whom there were consent forms at ABC Elementary School (Table 1). These students were members of a High Ability Resource Program, and this project was viewed as an enrichment project for them. Therefore, they participated in other activities that were not directly part of the Twinning Program, but which the students perceived as being part of the Twinning Project.

Table 1. *Demographics* (N=11)

Gender	How many?	Age	How many?	Race/Ethnicity	How many?	Native Language	How many?	2nd Language
Female	6	10	5	White	10	English	10	1
Male	5	11	6	Hispanic	1	Spanish	1	
Total	11		11		11		11	1

5. RESULTS

This study focuses on the results of the questionnaires, interview, and journals completed by the students. Besides demographic information, students were asked specific questions about the Twinning Project and the various enrichment activities they engaged in. Students also responded in their journals about each activity separately as they completed them.

The hypothesis of this study was: Students participating in the project would develop an understanding of diversity which goes beyond simply awareness of differences. The research question that this study seeks to answer is: How did the project accomplish or not accomplish this objective?

When evaluating a project involving learners, there may be several objectives to be met, such as assessment of materials, resources, and activities that were used in the project, as well as the roles that the various participants played (BBC, 2005). However, the ultimate goal of program assessment should be on how the students who were involved in the project benefited. Therefore, this study focuses on the following questions from the questionnaires to determine whether the project met the goal of facilitating teachers' and students' development of "an understanding and appreciation of diversity" (Jewish Agency, 2005, p. 3) which went beyond merely tolerant acceptance of others.

   – What did you like best?
   – What did you learn?
   – What would you recommend to improve this program?
   – Would you recommend it to others?

What did you like best?

This question was asked in several ways to try to elicit more complete answers. The questionnaire asked: What did you like best? to which students wrote a narrative response. The questionnaire also provided a list of the activities they engaged in and asked the participants to choose which of these they liked the best. During the videotaped interview, the interviewer also asked: What did you like best? The three activities that were identified as being the favorites, often more than once by each respondent, were the Pinwheels for Peace activity, and the guest speakers (Table 2).

Table 2 reports the activities in the order in which they were completed. The totals for each activity are aggregates from the various forms of repor-

ting. Therefore, a student may have indicated one activity as his/her favorite in one reporting format and another as the favorite in another.

Table 2. *Liked Best?*

Liked best?	Male	Female	Total
Letters	1	2	3
Pinwheels for Peace	3	4	7
Peace Doves	2	1	3
Guest Speaker – local Jewish woman who had visited Israel	5	5	10
Guest Speaker – young Israeli man	5	4	9

Some students elaborated on why they liked a certain activity. The ones who liked doing the Pinwheels reported that they enjoyed doing a craft activity. The ones who elaborated on why they liked the guest speakers said that they enjoyed learning about Israel from people who had actually been there.

In their journals the students also elaborated on the various projects. In general, the students wrote positive comments about each project. One boy who did not like the Pinwheels project or the Doves project said that he does not like coloring, and another stated that he thought they were ok, but he wanted to do a music project.

The students wrote the longest journal entries about each of the guest speakers. A local Jewish woman who had visited Israel was an employee of the school. All of the participants reported that they enjoyed learning about Israel's geography and culture from her. The other guest speaker was a young Israeli man, who was invited to speak to the class twice. On his first visit he spoke to the students about school, sports, music, and other topics of interest to youngsters. The second time he visited, he taught them how to write their names and the numbers 1-10 in Hebrew. The children wrote very positive comments about this visit.

The final person that the student viewed as a guest speaker was the American researcher who interviewed the students as a group in their classroom and video-taped the interaction. As a sort of thank you for their participation, she taught them an Israeli folk dance. Although this visit was not intended as a guest speaker event, the students perceived it that way as evidenced by

journal entries expressing their positive reactions to being interviewed, and to learning the dance.

What did you learn?

This question was asked in several ways to try to elicit more complete answers. There were three narrative questions on the questionnaire: What did you know about Israel before the project? What do you know now? What is the best thing you learned? The interviewer also asked: What is something new you learned about Israel? The three activities that were identified as being the favorites, often more than once by each respondent, were the Pinwheels for Peace activity, and the guest speakers (Table 3).

Table 3. *Learned?*

Knew before	Male	Female	Total
Nothing	3		3
Not much	2	4	6
Some		2	2
Learned?	**Male**	**Female**	
Some	1	2	3
A lot	4	4	8
Best thing learned?	**Male**	**Female**	
Write name in Hebrew	2	3	5
About schools in Israel		1	1
About the Dead Sea	3		3
About music		1	1
Israel's geography		1	1
Israeli society	1	2	3

In questionnaire responses and in the interview, several of the boys stated that they enjoyed learning about the Dead Sea. None of the girls mentioned the Dead Sea at those times, although in their journal entries, three of the girls and two of the boys commented on learning about the Dead Sea. Five respondents specifically expressed pleasure at learning how to write their

names in Hebrew. All the children commented that they learned a lot about Israel from both guest speakers.

What would you recommend to improve this program?

This question was addressed in the questionnaire and in the interview. The questionnaire stated: What do you wish you had done? During the videotaped interview, the children responded to: What are some other ideas you have about something interesting you could do to learn about Israel? (Table 4)

Table 4. *What else?*

What else?	Male	Female	Total
Correspondence	3	3	6
Call		1	1
Meet	2	3	5
Internet	1	1	2

Many of the students expressed a desire to have more contact with the students in Israel to get to know them. They would have liked to have exchanged more letters and pictures, or even to have met the other students.

Would you recommend the project to others?

Students responded to this question on the questionnaire: Why do you think other schools would like to do this kind of project? (Table 5)

Table 5. *Recommend?*

Recommend?	Male	Female	Total
To learn about Israel	2	2	4
To meet people from Israel	3	3	6

The two reasons that students identified for engaging in this project were: to learn more about the country and to meet people from there. These results were equally split among the boys and girls who responded to the question.

6. DISCUSSION

The original goal of the Twinning Project is to create relationships between students in the United States and in Israel. For this group of students that goal was not fulfilled. They met the teacher of the school in Israel when she visited their school, and received one set of letters from the students in Israel early in the project. Although they sent the Pinwheels for Peace and the Peace Doves to their cooperating school, they received nothing in return. The students were eager for connections with the other students as is demonstrated by this comment by one male student, "I would like it if when they wrote back, if they sent some class pictures." A female student said, "I hoped we would get a letter or something from the other kids like the projects we did."

A comparison of what the students liked and learned with what they recommend for improvement of the program and what they recommend to others clearly shows that the students valued making connections with other people. For example, one female student remarked in the interview: "I liked the guest speakers because they made it fun, but we learned a lot at the same time." Although the guest speakers were not part of the Twinning Project, they were an integral part of the enrichment activity as a whole.

As mentioned before, the Pinwheels for Peace Activity and the guest speakers were identified as the favorite activities by many of the students. Several of the students saw the Pinwheels activity as a form of communication with the students in Israel. The guest speakers were popular for a variety of reasons. One female student stated in the interview: "I liked the guest speakers because we got to learn a lot and it was actually fun listening to someone who has actually been to Israel and they told their experiences."

Pinwheels for Peace

The Pinwheels for Peace Activity was one of the original activities planned as part of the Twinning Project. The students created pinwheels from a pattern provided by the teacher. They colored their pinwheels and wrote something on them. The teacher took some pictures of the students with their pinwheels and she sent the pinwheels and the pictures to the collaborating teacher in Israel. The purpose of this activity was to be an ice-breaker for the students.

One of the male students wrote in his journal: "I enjoyed doing the pinwheels for peace. I thought that it is cool for us to do the same thing as the class in Israel is doing. I also enjoyed making them." One of the female students wrote in her journal entry: "Dear Journal, I think doing the pinwheel

project is a great idea. It's really fun. It's nice to be able to have a source of communication with these kids."

Unfortunately the students in Israel did not send anything back, so this activity was not the source of communication it was intended to be. The students also made Peace Doves to send to Israel, but again received nothing in return. Although this part of the project was not a success as a goal of the Twinning Project, the teacher had planned other activities which supplemented the Twinning activities.

Guest Speakers

The guest speakers did provide the students with contact which they enjoyed. Although, the guest speakers were not a part of the Twinning Project itself, the students perceived them to be. One guest speaker, Ms. C, an employee of the school, is Jewish and had visited Israel on several occasions. The young Israeli man, A, who spoke to the students was part of a program sponsored by the local Jewish Federation. His mission was to educate about and advocate for Israel. The final guest speaker was unintended. The researcher visited the class in order to videotape the students' reactions to the project and the students perceived this visit as part of the program.

Guest 1 – Ms. C

Student reactions to Ms. C were positive. They found the information that she provided about the geography and culture of Israel interesting and enjoyed the Israeli bubble gum that she brought for them. One female student commented in her journal: "She gave us some Bazooka gum. All of the words and even the comic inside of it was [sic] written in Hebrew and Arabic."

Several of the students commented that they learned that Israel was about the size of New Jersey. However the favorite facts seemed to be about the Dead Sea. Several students commented, as did this male student in the interview: "the Dead Sea has so much salt that you could float."

Guest 2 – A

The young Israeli man, A, was very popular with the students. He visited their class twice. On his first visit he talked about his life in Israel. One male student summed up A's first visit in this way: "I was very interested in what A was talking about. I learned a lot of things that are different about Israel from the U.S.A. and some things that are the same." Another boy wrote: "I really liked the Israelen [sic] speaker. He liked basketball which scores

points with me. But, I also learned a lot. It is awesome and I got all the notes down on paper. A is cool."

In his presentation, A talked about Israeli schools. Several students expressed amazement at how large Israeli classes are. One female student wrote in her journal: "I learned there are about 40 kids/classroom. Whoa! I thought 32 was a lot of kids."

Another female student who wrote about how much she learned from A also commented on his command of English:

> I was surprised how much English he knew and how well he spoke it. Our school was the first public school that he went to. I thought that he was very nice and he had a very interesting speech. I learned a lot.

A's second visit was equally successful because he taught the students how to write the Hebrew alphabet, taught them to count to ten in Hebrew, and taught each one how to write his or her name in Hebrew. Several students wrote their name in their journal in Hebrew after A's visit. One student said after A's second visit: "I think that writing in Hebrew is awesome! I've memorized how to count in Hebrew. I can also write my name. I had a little trouble at first. A is a good teacher." In describing this same visit, one female student wrote in her journal: "Today A came back to our school. He taught us how to write our name in Hebrew. I thought it was fun. It was very tricky and difficult. I hope A comes back again. He is awesome and fun." Another student told her journal:

> A came again to teach us how to write are [sic] name in Hebrew. It was so much fun. My full name is XXX and here is it in Hebrew. Don't forget you read and write from right to left. That's what I learned when A came.

Guest 3 – Researcher

The final person that the students perceived as a guest speaker connected to the Twinning Project was one of the researchers, which was unintentional. I had not thought about how the students would react to being interviewed, so reading their comments in their journals was interesting and enlightening. I also taught them an Israeli folk dance as sort of a final treat for them. During the interview, Ms. C came and watched and listened, and later the principal came in as we were doing the folk dance. The students very proudly performed for him.

For videotaping, the seats in the classroom were rearranged so that the students were sitting in a semi-circle. The students for whom we did not have consent forms sat on one arm of the semi-circle so that that they would be included and could participate in the interview, but they were not videotaped and their responses were not included in the transcript.

In their journals, most of the students wrote that they enjoyed learning the dance; however, several of the students expressed an interest in the interview process. One female student wrote in her journal:

> On Friday a visitor came and questioned us. I was nervous at first. Then, I was excited. I thought it was going to be boring but it was really fun. We learned a Israely [sic] folk dance. It was very easy.

Several of the students wrote that they liked being videotaped. One male student wrote that he liked learning the dance, but he also wrote: "I liked being on camera. It was awesome." Another male student also commented that he liked "being on video. I also liked it because it felt like we were being interviewed."

One male student wrote: "I loved reflecting on the project and dancing. It was fun to talk about it and learn something new. I also like to fill out questionnaires." Another student, a female student, also commented that she liked reflecting on the project with the other students:

> Dr. [name omitted for blind review] videotaped us. I liked this, now I know how other people feel about the project. I was happy I wasn't the only one who thought we really didn't know the kids in Isreal [sic] well. I also liked she taught us dance from Isreal [sic].

The teacher emailed later that she and the students were happy about participating in the research project. "Since we never really had contact with the class in Israel, your research project was a major part of the program for us."

Impact as a Cross-Cultural Project

Although the teacher and students were enthusiastic about the various activities, the project as a whole did not meet the goals and objectives of a true twinning project. "The aim of the Twinning Project, in particular, is not just to learn about another country and culture. It strives to develop collaborative problem-based learning activities which will facilitate an

understanding of diversity which goes beyond simply tolerance of diffe-
rences"[12].

Because there was no actual collaboration between the two schools, the
original research plan had to be changed. Therefore, this analysis focuses on
what the American students and teacher did do, and how they did or did not
meet the objective of developing an understanding of diversity which goes
beyond simply awareness of differences.

A cross-cultural project can provide students with multiple ways of lear-
ning about society and culture in another country. By providing a variety of
activities, the teacher helped the students to explore Israel's culture and
society from several perspectives. The teacher said,

> I believe that any means of exposure and experience in which students are actively
> engaged expands their thinking. This type of experience encourages questioning and
> connections to a whole new culture. The concept of sharing experiences like clothing,
> music, etc. promotes understanding and a sense of a world community.

The class activities and discussions gave the students an opportunity to share
their learning with others in the class, while journal entries and participating
in the research project helped the students to reflect on what they had lear-
ned. Many of the students also shared what they learned with their families.
One of the female students reported in the interview that:

> Every time that someone came or we learned about something, I would go home and
> show my parents or tell them about what happened. When I was home, when I was doing
> homework, I kept thinking about the stuff. I learned Hebrew. I wrote my name in
> Hebrew.

However, by examining the data gathered about this project in the Ame-
rican school, it is evident that these students did not develop a deeper
understanding and construct knowledge that went beyond awareness of diffe-
rences. While the questionnaires give some evidence of this, it is especially
apparent through their journal entries and the students' responses to the
interview questions, both of which show no real depth of learning, which
would have resulted, for instance, from problem-solving activities. The

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[12] L.W. Z i m m e r m a n, Y. P e l e d, *International Twinning as an Enrichment
Project*, "Academic Exchange Quarterly" 2009, No. 13 (1), p. 951-956.

activities in which they engaged taught facts and information about Israel and Israelis making the students aware of some of the similarities and differences between the United States and Israel and between the two cultures. However, the activities did not give them the opportunity to determine the importance and/or impact of these similarities and differences.

At first glance, one may assume that the reason the project only went this far was due to the failure of the communication process between the two groups. However, it is obvious that the teacher wanted the students to engage in the project at a deeper level, and that she made an attempt to create a richer experience for them despite the lack of collaboration. Nevertheless, the steps she took moved them into the awareness stage and no further. For example, the Pinwheels and Peace Dove activities could have been done for any reason and did not show a specific correlation to developing a deeper understanding about another culture. The teacher's attempts to improve the situation by bringing in the guest speakers and having the students keep journals about the experience did increase the students awareness, but again had no impact at a deeper level.

One conclusion is that the teacher herself did not realize that there is more to learning about other societies and cultures than merely awareness of them. Understanding diversity goes beyond awareness and tolerance[13]. It is often

> described as a continuum which includes stages such as cultural knowledge, knowing facts about a culture; cultural awareness or cultural acceptance, being aware that other cultures exist and acknowledging differences; and cultural sensitivity, being cognizant of how one may have to alter one's attitudes and/or behavior in order to interact effectively with someone from another culture[14].

It is not uncommon for diversity activities, such as this one, to go no further that the cultural knowledge or awareness stage. Such a "celebratory" approach avoids defining differences as deficiencies and highlights "the positive accomplishments and aspects of many different cultures and social groups"[15], and is often characterized by terms such as "awareness," "respect for others different from ourselves," "acceptance, and "tolerance." Students

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[13] J. B a n k s, C. B a n k s, *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley 2007; G o l l n i c k, C h i n n, *Multicultural education in a pluralistic society*; N i e t o, *Affirming diversity*.

[14] Z i m m e r m a n, P e l e d, *International Twinning as an Enrichment Project*, p. 954.

[15] B r u c h, J e h a n g i r, J a c o b s, G h e r e, *Enabling access: Toward multicultural developmental curriculum*, p. 13.

construct superficial knowledge about other people and groups when they are presented material using this approach. To develop authentic cultural sensitivity, people must engage in reflection, interaction, and collaboration[16].

According to constructivist theory[17] learning happens when an activity is engaged in within a particular context. Some theorists, such as Vygotsky[18] and Bakhtin[19] further assert that this creation of understanding is an interactive process, so that understanding comes from the consideration of different perspectives in a given sociocultural context. The teacher's role shifts from being "expert" and "transmitter of knowledge" to being that of "guide" and "facilitator" in order to "understand and challenge the learner's thinking"[20]. Learning occurs "when the learner's expectations are not met, and he or she must resolve the discrepancy between what was expected and what was actually encountered"[21]. Learning takes place as a result of the individual's "attempts to resolve the conflict"[22] as they examine different perspectives, often through interaction with others, and figure out their own solution.

This point of engagement is where this project fell short. The students were presented with knowledge, but were not asked to engage in any kind of problem-solving activity. Even though the original goal of doing a collaborative activity with students in Israel fell through, effective learning could have taken place if the students had engaged in a collaborative activity, even within their own classroom. Although these students were 5th graders, they

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[16] L.W. Z i m m e r m a n, *Teacher perceptions of multicultural education in the United States*, "Mountain Rise" 2006 [online], No. 3 (2).

[17] E. von G l a s e r s f e l d, *An introduction to radical constructivism*, in: *The Invented Reality*, ed. P. Watzlawick, New York: Norton 1984, pp. 17-40; E. von G l a s e r s f e l d, *Cognition, construction of knowledge, and teaching*, "Synthese" 1989, No. 80, p. 121-140; C.T. F o s n o t, *Enquiring teachers enquiring learners. a constructivist approach to teaching*, New York: Teacher's College Press 1989; R. R o r t y, *Objectivity, relativism, and truth: philosophical papers*, vol. I, Cambridge: MA: Cambridge University Press 1991; D u f f y, C u n n i n g h a m, *Constructivism: Implications for the design and delivery of instruction.*

[18] L. V y g o t s k y, *Thought and language*, Cambridge: MA: MIT Press 1962; L. V y g o t s k y, *Mind in society*, Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press 1978.

[19] D u f f y, C u n n i n g h a m, *Constructivism: Implications for the design and delivery of instruction.*

[20] Ibidem, p. 9.

[21] Ibidem, p. 33.

[22] Ibidem.

would have been capable of doing an in-depth project which would have given them more insight into Israel life and culture. For example, since many of the students were excited about learning how to write Hebrew, they could have examined why languages have evolved differently and what this evolution says about the society and culture in which the language users live. They could have looked at what other languages and cultures exist in Israel and compared the diversity in Israel with the diversity in the United States. They could have discussed what it would be like to live in a country and not be able to speak the language or to speak it well. In these ways they could have used what they were learning to construct their own knowledge about what diversity means beyond clothing and food.

CONCLUSION

According to constructivist theory, learners construct knowledge when they compare new information to their previous knowledge and create new knowledge by interweaving the old and the new[23]. According to Kagan & Kagan[24], such construction provides optimal opportunities for student engagement. In this study, these 5th grade students at an elementary school in the American Midwest did learn about Israel, as well as Israeli culture and Israeli society. They became aware that Israeli culture was different from their own, and they developed some appreciation for this different culture. However, this knowledge falls short of the goal of developing a deeper understanding of another culture, and developing authentic cultural sensitivity. The project lacked sufficient complexity for students to construct knowledge about diversity in a way that was more than awareness. They did not have the opportunity to interact and collaborate on a project which would have provoked that development, an activity in which they explored, thought about, questioned, and reflected "on connections, patterns, and concepts that would show them how the worldviews of two cultures play out in a real-life situation"[25]. Such in-depth experiences are necessary for effectively creating the environment

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[23] Ibidem; S t r o m m e n, *Constructivism, technology and the future of classroom learning.*

[24] K a g a n, K a g a n, *Cooperative learning: Course workbook.*

[25] Z i m m e r m a n, P e l e d, *International Twinning as an Enrichment Project*, p. 954.

for such comprehensive learning. Otherwise learning about another culture and society becomes like floating on the Dead Sea; it is all on the surface.

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FLOATING ON THE DEAD SEA:
CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE
IN A CROSS-CULTURAL PROJECT

S u m m a r y

In this article constructivist theory is used to examine a cross-cultural project that 5th grade students in the US and in Israel participated in during one academic year, focusing on the participants from school in the U.S. Although the teacher attempted to create a broad enrichment experience for the students, this project fell short of the goal of being an in-depth learning activity about another society and culture in order to promote tolerance. Using mixed method research methodology this study examines teacher and student experiences and

perceptions to determine what the students learned from the experience and how student learning could have been facilitated at a deeper level.

Key words: Diversity, Intercultural communication, constructivism, tolerance.

UNOSZENIE SIĘ NA MORZU MARTWYM:
KONSTRUOWANIE WIEDZY W PROJEKCIE MIĘDZYKULTUROWYM

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł analizuje doświadczenie komunikacji międzykulturowej, w którą byli zaangażowani uczniowie piątej klasy szkoły podstawowej w Stanach Zjednoczonych i w Izraelu w ciągu jednego roku szkolnego. Tekst prezentuje perspektywę doświadczeń i spostrzeżeń uczniów amerykańskich. Mimo że amerykański nauczyciel próbował stworzyć szansę szerokiego doświadczenia innej kultury dla uczniów, projekt zakończył się niepowodzeniem w realizacji komunikacji międzykulturowej promującej tolerancję. Artykuł analizuje sposób patrzenia nauczyciela i uczniów na inną kulturę, w celu określenia, czego amerykańscy studenci nauczyli się poprzez to doświadczenie, oraz próby udzielenia odpowiedzi na pytanie o to, jak stworzyć więcej możliwości interakcji, aby ułatwić uczniom naukę głębszego zrozumienia innej kultury.

Słowa kluczowe: różnorodność, komunikacja międzykulturowa, konstruktywizm, tolerancja.