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Creative exploration of local heritage in regional education: The example of the "Regional Fairy Tale" project

Twórcze odkrywanie dziedzictwa lokalnego w edukacji regionalnej na przykładzie projektu „Bajka regionalna"

Abstract

The aim of this article is to present the "Regional Fairy Tale" project, implemented among students of preschool and early school education at the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, and to analyse its significance in developing competences related to regional and reading education. The project was based on activating methods and on the creation of original fairy tales inspired by the culture, history and traditions of Warmia and Masuria. The study used qualitative data collection methods, such as overt observation, individual and group interviews, and analysis of the students' creative outputs.

The research findings indicate that participation in the project contributed to broadening students' knowledge of regional heritage and to the development of pedagogical competences, creativity and teamwork skills. The students became familiar with regional legends, symbols and folk beliefs, and acquired the ability to use the regional fairy tale in didactic work with preschool and early school-age children. The texts they created combined elements of local tradition with issues close to contemporary children, fulfilling both educational and formative functions.

The project confirmed that regional education implemented through creative and literary activities can effectively prepare future teachers for working with children, while also supporting the development of reading interests and a sense of cultural identity.

Keywords: fairy tale, cultural heritage, reading education, regional education, activating methods

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie projektu „Bajka regionalna" realizowanego wśród studentów pedagogiki przedszkolnej i wczesnoszkolnej Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego w Olsztynie oraz analiza jego znaczenia w rozwijaniu kompetencji związanych z edukacją regionalną i czytelniczą. Projekt oparto na metodach aktywizujących i tworzeniu autorskich bajek inspirowanych kulturą, historią i tradycją Warmii i Mazur. W badaniach wykorzystano jakościowe metody zbierania danych, takie jak obserwacja jawna, wywiady indywidualne i zbiorowe oraz analiza wytworów studentów.

Wyniki badań wskazują na to, że udział w projekcie przyczynił się do poszerzenia wiedzy studentów na temat dziedzictwa regionalnego oraz rozwoju kompetencji pedagogicznych, kreatywności i umiejętności pracy zespołowej. Studenci poznali regionalne legendy, symbole i wierzenia ludowe, a także nabyli umiejętność wykorzystywania bajki regionalnej w pracy dydaktycznej z dziećmi w wieku przedszkolnym i wczesnoszkolnym. Tworzone utwory łączyły elementy lokalnej tradycji z problemami bliskimi współczesnym dzieciom, pełniąc funkcję edukacyjną i wychowawczą.

Projekt potwierdził, że edukacja regionalna realizowana poprzez działania twórcze i literackie może skutecznie przygotowywać przyszłych nauczycieli do pracy z dziećmi oraz wspierać rozwijanie zainteresowań czytelniczych i poczucia tożsamości kulturowej.

Słowa kluczowe: bajka, dziedzictwo kulturowe, edukacja czytelnicza, edukacja regionalna, metody aktywizujące

Introduction

The "Regional Fairy Tale" project was organised in the academic year 2025/2026 as part of the course Regional and Historical Education, included in the curriculum of the third year of full-time and part-time studies in Preschool and Early School Pedagogy at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn. A total of 92 people participated in the project, including 91 female students and 1 male student.

The aim of the project was to provide knowledge about the Warmia and Masuria region through the creative exploration of local heritage, as well as to enable students to acquire the skills necessary to create their own regional fairy tales and to work with fairy tales among preschool and early school-age children. Therefore, the specific objectives included familiarising students with Warmian and Masurian fairy tales; the main characters and symbols embedded in tradition and appearing in such works; the structure of fairy tales; and their significance in developing and preserving the cultural heritage of the region for subsequent generations of inhabitants of Warmia and Masuria. The final outcome of the activities was the preparation and presentation of regional fairy tales by student groups. Work is currently underway on the publication of a teaching script that will include all the fairy tales created. The script will be made available in open access through the UWM repository.

I also assumed that the aim was to determine how students' participation in the project contributed to the development of their knowledge of the region and their skills in creatively exploring the heritage of Warmia and Masuria, as well as what emotions accompanied the participants.

Thus, the text focuses both on the impact of literary education on the young reader and on the application of activating methods in didactic work in higher education. In both areas, it refers to regional issues and their use in the education of both children and adults.

Research method

The basic research problems were formulated as answers to the following questions:

1. What knowledge and skills were acquired during the implementation of the "Regional Fairy Tale" project, and what emotions accompanied this process? This concerned the state of knowledge about the culture and traditions of Warmia and Masuria; the skills declared by the respondents as acquired during the project in the field of working with the regional fairy tale among preschool and early school-age children; and the emotions accompanying the process of constructing fairy tales.
2. What characteristic elements can be distinguished in the course of the project? This concerned the organisation of project activities, forms of cooperation among participants, and methods of creative exploration of the heritage of Warmia and Masuria presented by the participants.
3. What is the specificity of the regional fairy tales created by the students? This concerned their themes, characters, links to previously known local stories, and intended age group.

Qualitative data collection methods were used in the study:

4. Overt observation – of teams composed of students becoming familiar with regional fairy tales and methods of using them in the work of early school and preschool education teachers, as well as creating their own regional fairy tales. Eighteen teams of 3–4 full-time students and ten teams of 3–4 part-time students were observed. Krzysztof Rubacha describes this type of observation as ethnographic observation, during which participants give informed consent to participate in the study. Three consecutive stages of observation are distinguished: orientation, focused observation and selective observation.[1] Since the researcher was also the course instructor, the orientation and focused stages were carried out during earlier contact with the students. The actual research process therefore focused on the selective stage, the aim of which was to obtain answers to the formulated research problems.
5. Individual interviews focused on obtaining information – interviews were conducted with randomly selected students from among all participants in the classes.[2] Out of 91 full-time and part-time students, 15 students were selected. During the interviews, attention was focused on identifying the emotions that accompanied the respondents while jointly constructing regional fairy tales.
6. Group interviews focused on obtaining information[3] – interviews were conducted with two student groups of preschool and early school pedagogy students, totalling 92 people. The interviews were carried out separately among full-time

[1] K. Rubacha, *Metodologia badań nad edukacją*, Warszawa 2016, p. 151.
[2] *Ibidem*, p. 125.
[3] *Ibidem*, p. 133.

students, numbering 51 people, and part-time students, numbering 41 people. During the interviews, the focus was on determining what knowledge the project participants had acquired and what skills, in their opinion, they had developed in using regional fairy tales in work with preschool and early school-age children.

7. Analysis of secondary sources, i.e. regional fairy tales created by student groups – the analysis of the material was carried out through complex activities subject to analytical induction: data reduction, representation and verification.[4] I adopted analytical categories such as theme, characters, connection with previously known local stories, and intended age group. During the analysis I also focused on determining the increase in the project participants' knowledge.

Reading education as an area of influence on the child reader

Reading education constitutes an important area of educational and cultural influence on the child. Its aim is not only to develop reading skills, but also to shape a conscious recipient of cultural texts. However, the contemporary development of new media and audiovisual communication makes the process of developing reading competences increasingly complex. Gabriela Kapica emphasises that reading culture includes interests, habits and skills that allow individuals to participate actively in culture through contact with the printed word.[5]

Literature enables children to learn about reality, develops imagination, the capacity for self-reflection and metaphorical thinking. Contact with literary texts fosters the independent construction of meanings and the development of creative thinking.[6] Reading education therefore influences not only the linguistic development of the child, but also their emotional, social, and axiological development. As Anna Warzocha observes, literature "orders children's aesthetic chaos" and helps them build their own cultural identity.[7]

A significant problem in contemporary reading education is the declining interest in books among children and young people. According to a report by the National Library, in 2022 only 34% of respondents had read at least one book, while regular reading was declared by only a small percentage of respondents.[8] The contemporary young recipient functions mainly within the culture of the image,

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 259.

[5] G. Kapica, *Kultura czytelnicza priorytetem współczesnego społeczeństwa*, "Eunomia" 2024, No. 1(107), pp. 173–186.

[6] Z.A. Kłakówna, *Bierz i czytaj*…, Kraków 2023, p. 21.

[7] A. Warzocha, *Edukacja czytelnicza w opiniach studentów pedagogiki przedszkolnej i wczesnoszkolnej*, " Humanitas Pedagogika i Psychologia" 2024, No. 2(30), p. 92.

[8] Z. Zasacka, R. Chymkowski, *Stan czytelnictwa książek w roku 2022 w Polsce w drugim roku pandemii (2021–2022)*, Warszawa 2023, pp. 8–10.

which limits the need for contact with the written word.[9] In this situation, reading initiation beginning in early childhood becomes particularly important. Joanna Papuzińska emphasises that a person is "not born a reader" but becomes one through appropriate educational activities.[10]

Reading education should build an emotional bond between the child and literature, while also taking into account the experiences of contemporary children growing up in digital culture. It therefore becomes necessary to seek attractive forms of working with texts while maintaining the high quality of children's literature.[11] Effective reading education should combine the traditional values of literature with the needs of a child functioning in media culture.

Activating methods in higher education

Activating methods and techniques foster the development of creative thinking, cooperation skills and interpersonal relationships.[12] Thanks to them, students learn how to acquire knowledge independently, conduct discussions and communicate effectively. The teacher, in turn, acts as the organiser and coordinator of the didactic process.[13]

David A. Kolb, describing experiential learning, distinguished four stages of the educational process: experience, reflection, the ordering of knowledge and experimentation.[14] This model emphasises the importance of the individual's active participation in the process of acquiring knowledge.

Beata Gola and Dorota Pauluk point out that activating methods support the development of the professionalism of academic teachers.[15] Engaging students in action and emotional experience of content increases the effectiveness of learning and develops creativity and practical competences.[16]

Contemporary higher education increasingly uses the project method, also referred to as problem-based learning. It is based on independent problem-solving and teamwork, and its foundations derive from the concepts of John Dewey and

[9] A. Warzocha, *Edukacja czytelnicza*…, p. 92.

[10] J. Papuzińska, *Inicjacje literackie. Problemy pierwszych kontaktów dziecka z książką*, Warszawa 1988, pp. 32–45.

[11] A. Warzocha, *Edukacja czytelnicza*…, p. 92.

[12] M. Śnieżyński, *Zarys dydaktyki dialogu*, Kraków 2000, p. 43.

[13] O. Jabłonko, *Znaczenie metod aktywizujących w pracy nauczyciela* [in:] *Pedagogika i zarządzanie wobec wyzwań współczesności*, eds. L. Kowalczyk, M.J. Żmichrowska, F. Mroczko, Wałbrzych 2021, pp. 35–50.

[14] B. Gola, P. Pauluk, *Stosowanie metod aktywizujących przejawem profesjonalizmu nauczyciela akademickiego*, "Polish Journal of Continuing Education" 2015, No. 2, pp. 26–38.

[15] *Ibidem*.

[16] K. Szewczuk, *Metody dydaktyczne stosowane w szkole wyższej*, Kraków 2013, p. 12.

Jean Piaget, who emphasised the importance of learning through action and experience.[17]

The project method develops creativity, independence and the ability to use knowledge in practice, while also requiring the integration of knowledge from various fields. It is particularly important in the preparation of preschool and early school education teachers, as it develops the communication, organisational and social competences necessary in pedagogical work.[18] A teacher who has previously participated in projects is better prepared to organise activating educational activities with children. The project method supports learning through action, develops cognitive curiosity and peer cooperation, preparing children for active functioning in the contemporary world.[19]

Knowledge and skills acquired during the implementation of the "Regional Fairy Tale" Project

A. State of knowledge about the culture and traditions of Warmia and Masuria

The analysis of students' statements, collected during group interviews, and of the regional fairy tales they prepared indicates that participation in project activities contributed to a clear broadening of their knowledge of the culture, history and traditions of Warmia and Masuria. At the initial stage of the project, the respondents' knowledge was most often limited to basic associations connected with the region, such as lakes, forests or selected folk figures. Many students also declared limited familiarity with regional children's literature and local legends and tales.

According to the respondents, participation in the project activities enabled them to learn about characteristic elements of the culture of Warmia and Masuria, including regional symbols, rituals, folk beliefs and characters appearing in Warmian and Masurian fairy tales. The discovery of local stories connected with specific towns, historical figures and the nature of the region was of particular significance. The students indicated that the project enabled them to notice the educational potential of regional heritage and its importance in building children's sense of cultural identity.

The analysis of the research material collected during group interviews showed that participants began to perceive the regional fairy tale not only as a literary form, but also as a tool for transmitting values, traditions and knowledge about the "little homeland." The works created included natural, historical and cultural motifs characteristic of the

[17] M. Lubina, *Metoda projektu w procesie dydaktycznym uczelni wyższej* [in:] *Uczelnia oparta na wiedzy. Organizacja procesu dydaktycznego oraz zarządzanie wiedzą w ekonomicznym szkolnictwie wyższym*, eds. T. Gołębiowski, M. Dąbrowski, B. Mierzejewska, Warszawa 2005, pp. 224–231.

[18] M.M. Kowalczyk, *Potencjał metody projektowej w nauczaniu zdalnym na uczelni wyższej na przykładzie przedmiotu „Projekt edukacyjny"*, "Biblioteka Nauki" 2022, pp. 159–172.

[19] J.A. Stephenson, *The Project Method of Teaching*, New York 2010, p. 21.

region, which testified to the conscious use of the information acquired. Students referred, among other things, to Warmian and Masurian landscapes, old beliefs, regional names and elements of the everyday life of the region's inhabitants.

B. Skills declared by the respondents as acquired during the project in the field of working with regional fairy tales among preschool and early school-age children

During group interviews, the respondents emphasised that participation in the project enabled them to develop numerous practical competences related to their future pedagogical work. The skill most frequently indicated was the independent creation of literary texts adapted to the perceptual abilities of preschool and early school-age children. Students pointed out that constructing a fairy tale required the appropriate selection of content, language and characters, as well as the ability to build a simple and comprehensible didactic message.

The project participants also declared the development of competences related to planning educational activities based on regional literature. They indicated that they had acquired knowledge of ways to use fairy tales in didactic, educational and integrative activities. At the same time, they emphasised the importance of activating methods in didactic work in preschool groups and at the early school stage, such as drama, staging, artistic activities, creative storytelling and thematic games inspired by the content of the works.

According to the students, an important area of acquired competences was also the ability to work in a team. The implementation of the project required joint planning of activities, division of responsibilities, negotiation of ideas and shared responsibility for the final result. The respondents indicated that this experience helped them prepare better for future cooperation with other teachers and for organising group work among children.

The analysis of students' statements also showed that the project developed their creativity and openness to non-standard educational activities. Many participants emphasised that they had not previously attempted to create their own literary texts, whereas participation in the project allowed them to overcome fears related to creative activity and strengthened their sense of pedagogical competence.

C. Emotions accompanying the construction of fairy tales

Based on the analysis of statements collected through individual interviews, it can be concluded that during the implementation of the project, students experienced diverse emotions that changed at successive stages of work. Initially, some respondents declared uncertainty and concerns related to the need to write a regional fairy tale independently. The greatest difficulty for them was creating an original story and combining educational elements with a plot attractive to children.

The students emphasised that in the subsequent stages of the project, positive emotions began to dominate, such as satisfaction, interest, and a sense of agency. The respondents noted that the possibility of creating a story together fostered group integration and gave them a sense of participating in a valuable undertaking. Many statements also referred to the discovery of one's own creativity and the joy resulting from the possibility of referring to local culture and tradition.

The students also indicated that the presentation of the completed fairy tales was associated with emotions such as pride, excitement, and emotion. Of particular importance was the awareness that the prepared works could be used in future pedagogical work and made available to a wider audience in the planned publication.

Characteristic elements in the course of the project

A. Organisation of project activities

The project was organised in accordance with the assumptions of the project method and the concept of experiential learning. The activities were divided into several stages, including familiarising students with regional literature, analysing existing Warmian and Masurian fairy tales, planning their own works, creative work in teams, and presenting the outcomes.

An important element of the project organisation was the combination of students' independent work with the role of the academic teacher as coordinator and guide of the educational process. The teacher supported participants in searching for source materials, moderated discussions, and helped refine the concepts of the fairy tales, while at the same time leaving students considerable autonomy.

A characteristic feature of the project was also its practical orientation. Students not only acquired theoretical knowledge concerning regional education and children's literature, but above all, used it in specific creative activity. This made it possible to combine academic knowledge with practical experience and the development of professional competencies of future teachers.

B. Forms of cooperation among participants

The project was based mainly on teamwork carried out in small groups. Based on observation, it can be concluded that such an organisation of activities fostered the exchange of ideas, joint problem-solving, and the development of interpersonal competences. I noticed that participants often spontaneously divided roles according to their predispositions and interests. Some people were responsible for creating the plot, others for editing the text, preparing illustrations, or preparing the presentation.

Cooperation was partnership-based and relied on dialogue and mutual support among participants. The students emphasised that the possibility of working in

a group facilitated the generation of ideas and increased their sense of security during creative activities. At the same time, situations arose that required negotiation of positions and conflict resolution, which fostered the development of communication competencies.

An important element of cooperation was also the exchange of experiences among students. Participants referred to their own family practices, local traditions, and childhood memories, which enriched the stories they created and gave them an authentic character.

C. Methods of creative exploration of the heritage of Warmia and Masuria presented by the participants

Numerous activating methods were used in the implementation of the project, fostering the creative exploration of regional heritage. On the basis of observation, it can be inferred that students analysed literary texts, searched for information about local legends and traditions, conducted discussions, and created mind maps associated with the region. An important element of the activities was also the use of their own experiences and memories connected with Warmia and Masuria.

When constructing fairy tales, participants used elements of creative storytelling, brainstorming, and improvisation. In many groups, artistic activities also appeared, supporting the process of building the plot and creating characters. Students often gave their stories a contemporary character, combining traditional regional motifs with issues close to contemporary children, such as environmental protection, friendship, or cooperation.

A characteristic element of the project was also the integration of various areas of education. The fairy tales created combined literary, historical, natural, and cultural content, which allowed students to notice the interdisciplinary character of regional education. As a result, the project became an example of the practical use of activating methods in higher education and confirmed that creative activities based on local heritage can constitute an effective tool for preparing future teachers to work with children.

Specificity of the regional fairy tales authored by students

The main themes addressed in the regional fairy tales created by students included issues related to the founding of towns, the origins of symbols placed in the coats of arms of particular localities, as well as historical events, including military activities carried out in Warmia and Masuria. There were also works whose leading motifs were friendship, love, truth, the struggle between good and evil, and respect for older people. Among the fairy tales, one also finds texts addressing the

problem of loneliness among children and adults, perseverance, and overcoming one's own weaknesses, both physical and psychological. A small number of works focused on the histories of local castles, churches, and other places important for the region's cultural heritage.

In the works presented by the students, the protagonists are most often children who, thanks to their curiosity, discover the world of local tales and legends. They establish contact with magical figures derived from folk beliefs, such as kołbuki, witches, or spirits, as well as with animals and birds endowed with human qualities. In their journeys and discovery of regional secrets, they are helped by older people, who act as guardians of memory concerning the tradition, history, and culture of the region. Among the main characters, there are also fantastic figures emerging from the waves of lakes and rivers or arising from local vegetation. It is they who tell stories about the histories of towns, the origins of coats of arms, and the meaning of the symbols connected with them.

All the works are based on previously heard legends and folk tales. They refer to places of particular importance to the local community and bear witness to the history of Warmia and Masuria. However, an important element of the students' creative work is the enrichment of traditional stories with new characters and their adventures. As a result, the characters learn to distinguish between good and evil, build their own system of values, develop empathy, and learn respect for the older generation, which provides living testimony to the continuity of regional cultural heritage. These fairy tales, therefore, fulfil not only an entertainment function, but also an educational and formative one, contributing to the preservation of memory about the culture and history of the region.

Conclusions

The implementation of the "Regional Fairy Tale" project makes it possible to state that the project method is an effective tool supporting both the development of students' regional knowledge and the shaping of the pedagogical competences of future preschool and early school education teachers. The use of activating methods and experiential learning fostered students' engagement in the didactic process, increased their independence, and enabled them to use the acquired knowledge in practice.

The research showed that participation in the project contributed to broadening the participants' knowledge of the culture, traditions, and heritage of Warmia and Masuria. The students became familiar with regional fairy tales, symbols, characters, and elements of local beliefs and history. At the same time, they began to recognise the importance of regional education in the process of building children's cultural identity and the role of literature in transmitting values and knowledge about the "little homeland."

Another important outcome of the project was the development of practical competencies related to the respondents' future professional work. Students acquired the ability to create literary texts adapted to the needs of preschool and early school-age children, to plan didactic activities based on regional literature, and to use activating methods in pedagogical work. The project also fostered the development of creativity, independence, and communication and interpersonal competencies related to teamwork.

The analysis of participants' statements also indicates that the implementation of the project was accompanied by strong emotions that influenced the learning process. Initial concerns related to creative activity gradually gave way to satisfaction, a sense of agency, and engagement. The possibility of jointly creating regional fairy tales fostered group integration and the building of positive educational experiences. The students' emotional engagement also increased the durability of the knowledge acquired and their motivation for further creative activities.

The study also showed that the project-based form of work fosters the effective combination of theory and practice. Students not only acquired knowledge concerning regional education and children's literature, but above all, used it in specific creative activities. This made it possible to develop a reflective approach to future teaching work and to shape an attitude of active and conscious participation in regional culture.

The analysis of the regional fairy tales created by students shows that project participants willingly referred to natural, historical, and cultural motifs characteristic of Warmia and Masuria. The stories created combined elements of local tradition with contemporary problems close to children, such as friendship, cooperation, and care for the natural environment. This demonstrates the skilful integration of regional content with educational and didactic aims.

The "Regional Fairy Tale" project also confirmed that regional education can constitute an important element of contemporary reading education. Regional literature offers the possibility of developing children's reading interests, building a bond with their place of residence, and strengthening their sense of cultural identity. In conditions of declining reading levels among children and young people, didactic activities combining attractive forms of work with valuable literature and local cultural heritage have become particularly significant.

The results obtained indicate that projects based on the creative exploration of regional heritage may constitute a valuable element of teacher education. They not only allow students to develop their knowledge and competencies, but also prepare them to organise activating and engaging educational activities in their work with children. The "Regional Fairy Tale" project shows that creative activities based on local heritage can be a valuable tool in preschool and early school education. Creating regional fairy tales fosters the development of children's reading interests, stimulates imagination, and supports the building of bonds with local culture

and tradition. The project also confirmed the importance of activating methods in preparing future teachers to organise creative and engaging educational activities.

The study was qualitative in nature and was conducted among students of one field of study and one university, which limits the possibility of generalising the results. In the future, it would be worthwhile to extend the research to other academic centres and to use quantitative methods. An important direction for further analysis may also be to determine the impact of regional fairy tales on the development of children's reading and cultural competencies.

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