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Meet the “Children of the World”

Intercultural media education on the web

The Internet project “Children of the World” presented here aims at promoting intercultural education and tries to introduce children in a childlike and playful way to the lives and habits of children from different countries via Internet.

Media always present images of reality – including images that are unknown to one’s own experience, such as images of other countries, cultures and people. Yet they are just small windows which can only show an extract of reality. Nevertheless, these media presentations significantly influence the opinions and ideas one holds about other cultures. Children, in particular, who develop their concept of reality while growing up, need orientation and encouragement with respect to their media socialization (cf. Schorb, e.g. 2003). When it comes to images of other cultures that are transported via television or the web, we often find presentations full of stereotypes and clichés – immigrants, for example, are often portrayed as delinquent and unable to become integrated into society. The aim of intercultural media education should thus be to analyse such clichés

and to break with stereotypes. Children should have the right to access appropriate media environments that provide them with authentic insights into other cultures.

Intercultural education through the Internet

“Children of the World”, a project initiated by the PRIX JEUNESSE Foundation, aims at doing precisely this: to promote intercultural education through media. It is made for children and wants to introduce them to different ways of life from around the world.

On the website *www.childrenoftheworld.de* children have the opportunity to access other cultures in an authentic, childlike and playful way. The website is explicitly made for children by children who participated in the project and presented themselves and their way of living. The opening page starts with an airplane taking the visitor to a world map where children can choose between different flags in order

to visit the country they want to get to know (cf. ill. 1). Each country section features a group of children presenting themselves.

Central to the website’s concept is the fo-

cus on universal topics that are relevant to children’s realities all over the world, such as family, school, friends, food, games, or music. Through these cultural topics children learn to be aware of differences and specific characteristics of other cultures. The educational objective is to learn to appreciate these cultural distinctions as enrichment and learning opportunities with respect to one’s own life. At the same time, children come to understand the similarities between their own and other cultures – the common ground and bridge between them. Finally, set within this context, the aim of intercultural learning should be to perceive cultural diversity as enrichment instead of a threat (cf. Auernheimer, 2000).

Another objective of the website is to give children of primary school age an appropriate and safe web environment. Thus, the navigation and design of the website are adjusted accordingly to children’s needs at this age: the entire content is presented in a clearly arranged way, colourful and appealing to children. The website is not overloaded with objects and functions. Furthermore, the spaces between the objects are broad and make it easy to click (cf. Warth et al., 2010).

In order to provide children all over the world with access to the website, written language sections are kept short and simple. Also, children at this age are reading beginners and might be overstrained with too much verbal explanation; most of the content is explained on a non-verbal, visual



Ill. 1: “Children of the World” opening page with flags for choosing a country

level through country flags, universal icons, pictures, drawings, or videos. Basic reading skills are useful but not essential to understanding the meaning of the website's content.

Cultural presentations from the children's point of view

Media partners of the PRIX JEUNESSE Foundation realized the project with groups of local children from their respective world regions – sometimes with children from the neighbourhood, from a youth centre, a boarding school or an orphanage. Common to all children who participated in the project is that they had to answer the same questions: “Who are you?”, “Where do you live?”, “Where do you go to school?”, “What is your favourite dish?”, “What is your favourite game?”, or “What is your favourite song?”

There are 6 different sections featuring kids at home, with friends, at school, playing or singing. The results are presented in a non-verbal way through pictures, drawings, and videos.

Children from all parts of the world – among them Argentina, Mongolia, Nepal, South Korea, Ghana, or Moldavia – have already expressed their cultures from their own point of view. The results are very colourful and diverse: the website's visitor can, for example, observe how children live in different regions of the world: in “yurts” in Mongolia, in a city

house in Buenos Aires, or in a red-coloured brick house in the countryside of Nepal (cf. ill. 2).

In the section about the children's favourite food the most colourful and delicious dishes are featured: children from Nepal prefer “Momo” – a kind of flour dumpling filled with meat or vegetables. A variation of this dumpling called “Buuz” is one of the favourite dishes of Mongolian children. In Ghana children name “Fufu” – a sort of yam porridge combined with plantain or maize – their favourite dish. On the other side, it is interesting to observe that some specific preferences of children work on a global level: Pizza, for instance, is by far the most favoured dish of children, no matter whether they live in Columbia, Germany, Moldavia, or South Korea (cf. ill. 3). This is a tendency probably caused by globalization.

Children from all countries love games with music, rhythm, and movement. Some of them involve stones – like the children from Nepal or Ghana battling in speed, ability, and sense of rhythm. Some play variations of hand clapping games like in Argentina or Mongolia. But again it is interesting to observe that some games are known all over the world like “hide-and-peek” or “musical chairs”.

Involvement of parents and teachers

Additionally to the children's site, there is a teacher's section where parents, teachers, or media educators

find guidelines on how to use the material at home, in class, or for media projects. The guidelines provide for example background information on the country's history, population, typical customs, celebrations, geography, or nature. With respect to this, the focus is, of course, on facts that might be interesting for children e.g.: What does the country look like? What kinds of animals live there? How long do children have to go to school. The teacher's section provides instructions on how to use the material in class or at home. Teachers and parents are supported with suggestions for further activities like doing handicrafts, cooking the recipes that are featured on the children's site, or game instructions.

The website is currently available in English and German language. Other language versions are planned. The PRIX JEUNESSE Foundation is currently collaborating with different media partners so that the number of flags on the world map will be steadily growing. There is still a lot to be explored through this window to the world! ■

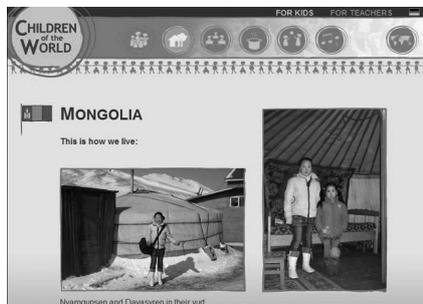
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Ill. 2: Mongolian children present their home: a “yurt”



Ill. 3: Children's favourite food in South Korea: traditional food and pizza