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ORIGINAL

Archeology as an educational tool for contributing to knowledge of cultural identity in childhood

Arqueología como herramienta educativa para la contribución al conocimiento de la identidad cultural en las infancias

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the integration of archaeology and pedagogy as an educational strategy aimed at fostering cultural identity in childhood. From a multidisciplinary perspective, the workshop "Little archaeologists: Discovering the ancient world" was designed and implemented, incorporating participatory activities such as simulated excavations and symbolic representation through Mesoamerican deity masks. The research was conducted in three different contexts in Veracruz, Mexico, involving children aged 6 to 12, allowing for the observation of variations in engagement and knowledge appropriation depending on the sociocultural environment. Findings indicate that playful and experiential methodologies enhance understanding of archaeological heritage, strengthen the sense of belonging, and stimulate curiosity about the past. Direct interaction with archaeological materials and practices generated higher levels of engagement compared to traditional memorization-based approaches. The study shows that early heritage education contributes to the formation of individuals aware of the value of their cultural legacy and their role in its preservation, highlighting the importance of collaboration between archaeology and pedagogy in developing meaningful educational practices.

Keywords: archaeology; heritage education; cultural identity; childhood; experiential learning; heritage.

RESUMEN

El estudio examina la integración de la arqueología y la pedagogía como estrategia educativa orientada a la construcción de la identidad cultural en la infancia. A partir de un enfoque multidisciplinario, se diseñó e implementó el taller "Pequeños arqueólogos: Descubriendo el mundo antiguo", basado en actividades participativas como excavaciones simuladas y representación simbólica mediante máscaras de deidades mesoamericanas. La investigación se desarrolló en tres contextos distintos del estado de Veracruz, con población infantil de entre 6 y 12 años, lo que permitió observar variaciones en el interés y la apropiación del conocimiento según el entorno sociocultural. Los resultados evidencian que las metodologías lúdicas y experienciales favorecen la comprensión del patrimonio arqueológico, fortalecen el sentido de pertenencia y estimulan la curiosidad por el pasado. Asimismo, se identificó que el contacto directo con los objetos y prácticas arqueológicas genera mayor implicación que los enfoques tradicionales centrados en la memorización. El estudio muestra que la educación patrimonial en edades tempranas contribuye a la formación de sujetos conscientes del valor de su herencia cultural y de su papel en su preservación, destacando la relevancia del trabajo conjunto entre arqueología y pedagogía como base para propuestas educativas significativas.

Palabras clave: arqueología; educación patrimonial; identidad cultural; infancia; aprendizaje lúdico; patrimonio.

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INTRODUCTION

Archeology is not limited to the study of the past but also allows for the creation of fundamental pedagogical strategies to strengthen cultural identity processes from an early age. By bringing children closer to material remains and practices of interpreting the past, recognition of their roots and appreciation for cultural diversity are fostered.

Through archaeology, different tools can be developed that allow children to understand and develop a comprehensive knowledge of archaeological heritage and their cultural identity. These tools include different approaches and methods that can be used to develop a teaching and learning process, with the aim of presenting different teaching methodologies that seek to disseminate, connect, and preserve archaeological heritage in a simple and enjoyable way.

Integrating archaeology into basic education through workshops, guided museum tours, and participatory activities allows children to become protagonists of their own learning. This contributes to the development of cognitive and social skills while also generating an emotional connection to heritage, reinforcing the construction of a cultural identity and a sense of belonging to a conscious and respectful community.

In this sense, archaeology applied to early childhood education acts as a bridge between the past and the present, providing a solid foundation for valuing collective memory and cultivating a commitment to the conservation and dissemination of cultural heritage in new generations.

Loss of an active child audience

Today's children face a disconnect from their cultural and pre-Hispanic past. Children show little interest in understanding the history of their communities and recognizing themselves as part of a cultural legacy that precedes them. In the educational sphere, this problem is reflected in the fact that content related to history and cultural heritage is often taught in an abstract, rote manner that is disconnected from children's everyday experiences. This means that a true sense of belonging is not awakened, nor is the exploration of cultural identity through direct contact with the vestiges of the past encouraged.

This lack of interest is worrying, as by not recognizing or valuing their cultural heritage, children grow up without a clear sense of identity, leading to apathy toward the preservation of heritage and a progressive loss of collective memory. This weakens the transmission of knowledge, symbols, and values that make up a cultural collective. This gives rise to the need to propose projects and methodologies that integrate archaeology into educational processes for children, awakening their interest in their pre-Hispanic past and serving as a means to strengthen their knowledge, appreciation, and appropriation of cultural identity from early stages of development.

Archaeology in early education

Archaeology and education are related to cultural identity, which has been addressed in different academic contexts. History in basic education is characterized by a memorization-based approach, focusing more on dates and figures, which limits the appropriation of a sense of belonging and interest in their pre-Hispanic past. The background presented in the field of heritage education highlights the relationship between archaeology and basic education.

The link between two sciences, archaeology and pedagogy, can make a valuable contribution to the understanding of a comprehensive representation of archaeological heritage, as mentioned by Contreras Mejía, A. A. (2023) in his article. He considers that by having different approaches, a teaching and learning process can be developed for children, young people, and society as a whole. He proposes methods that can be used to disseminate, preserve, and enjoy the heritage left by various traces of past and present civilizations. He points out that archaeology is an integral part of archaeological heritage and expresses an interdisciplinary approach between archaeology and pedagogy, providing a framework for understanding the educational requirements of a population committed to the conservation and communication of its archaeological heritage as a symbol of its roots.

Díaz (2015) mentions that educating society about archaeology and heritage is definitely a means by which human beings can be trained to be active and aware of their protection and appreciation of cultural identity. Media such as magazines, comics, or children's books dedicated to archaeology keep children as active audiences. Cultural and archaeological heritage depends to a large extent on the education that society receives. The author points out that if children learn about and experience their heritage, they are more likely to consider it part of themselves in adulthood. Heritage education seeks to raise awareness among the population as a way of creating attitudes of respect and achieving a relationship between society and heritage.

In Mexico, as in other countries, promoting heritage among children is important for helping them understand archaeological heritage and why preserving it is important. One of the institutions responsible for this type of promotion has by the National Institute of Anthropology and History. As shown in the article (INAH, 2014), through vacation programs, they created activities for the dissemination of archaeological heritage and the creation of a cultural identity in a playful and creative way. In the state of Veracruz, the Xalapa Museum of Anthropology (MAX) has been among the leaders in children's programs for the dissemination of archaeological heritage with its Sunday program "Cuates del MAX" (Friends of the MAX), which uses fun and creative activities to bring children closer to the museum and everything it has to offer through guided tours and recreational activities.

Theoretical Framework

This research is of utmost importance for the creation of human beings who are conscious of their own cultural identity and their own caring for their heritage. One of the added strengths of this research is that children are in control of their own learning and, through very important factors such as emotions, they can learn in a pleasant way and develop a multidisciplinary understanding. The use of methodologies in which children are fully involved in understanding what they are seeing and touching can help them understand their past in a more enjoyable way.

With activities adapted to children's language and their way of seeing the world, we can guide them in a fun way so that we as researchers can also learn from them and that both parties can generate effective knowledge with mutual understanding, where the priority is the dissemination and conservation of archaeological heritage, leaving behind our vision of superior knowledge, enabling children to share their doubts and their vision of the pre-Hispanic world with the present world.

Multidisciplinary effort

Pedagogy and archaeology are closely related. Through pedagogy, it is possible to accurately identify certain factors that help or influence the dissemination and promotion of archaeological heritage in the classroom. For children, a broad pedagogical approach will help them have active, participatory, and focused experience, which helps us act as facilitators and mediators of knowledge and not just as transmitters. Through constructivism, where children construct their learning through interactions with their environment, playful pedagogy, and meaningful learning, and children are encouraged to reflect on and take ownership of their learning through games and playful, creative teaching.

Age greatly influences the type of teaching to which pedagogical methodologies are applied for effective and enjoyable learning about archaeology, depending on the needs of the audience to whom we are going to transmit knowledge. The process of teaching or transmitting knowledge depends on our ability to understand what our young audience is seeing, how they understand it, what they can or cannot appreciate, and how they imagine it. To this end, it is important to construct or design a suitable and innovative proposal for today's young audience because of the changes that have taken place over the years in childhood and the new factors that influence their learning.

METHODS

Heritage education allows us to approach both cultural and natural objects, as it is an educational process that enables people to recognize, value, and participate in the preservation of their cultural heritage. As Morales (2020) mentions, this approach, through practices such as observation, exploration, and conservation, to more complex practices such as contemplation, critical thinking, transformative exercises, and emotional connection, requires sensory, cognitive, emotional, and social engagement, referring to a connection not only with meaning but also with sense. Early literacy allows children not only to learn about their environment but also to enjoy and appreciate it. It is a tool for connecting people with their heritage.

Under the justification of archaeology and pedagogy, the application of various pedagogical methodologies for teaching, dissemination, and outreach of archaeological heritage contributes to the creation of a cultural identity. The children's archaeological workshop "Little Archaeologists: Discovering the Ancient World" was developed, where a simulated archaeological excavation was carried out for children, emphasizing methodologies and care for cultural heritage within an archaeological excavation unit. This was done inside plastic boxes (excavation units), which were filled with soil and archaeological remains (recreational material) such as tepalcates, pots, shells, obsidian, bone remains, and masks, which can be found in an archaeological excavation. Through this activity, the children, together with the tools that an archaeologist would use in the field (sieve, bucket, and shovel), excavate in a methodical manner, explaining the importance of each of the elements found inside the box and emphasizing how important they are for the construction of our identity and prEhispanic past.

Another activity was Masks of the Gods, in which Mesoamerican gods (Tlaloc, Cipactli, Huehueteotl, and Ehecat) were identified through paper masks decorated with glitter in Mesoamerican colors: red, green, and blue. The aim was to help participants understand the importance of the environment in the pre-Hispanic world, the importance of each god, and the role they played in society. It also sought to help children recognize some of the most important colors in the Mesoamerican world, how they were made, and their meaning in the past and present.

RESULTS

This workshop has been held three times, at the elementary school level and in completely different social contexts: the first experience in the community of El Viejón, the second at the Museum of Anthropology in Xalapa, and the third at the National Children's and Youth Book Fair in Veracruz, with children ranging in age from 6 to 12. Each of the experiences was completely different, highlighting the importance of the social context and environment in which children grow up.

During the first experiment, carried out in the town of El Viejón, in the municipality of Actopan Veracruz, a community with daily contact with an archaeological site in its immediate surroundings and first-hand contact with archaeological remains, when the workshop was implemented, we observed that the children did not initially show any interest. We noticed a lack of enthusiasm and apathy toward acquiring the information that was going to be provided to them. However, when we explained what the activity consisted of, their reaction improved. During the implementation process, we explained the working methodology, answered their questions, and acquired knowledge.

We observed a change in attitude to a positive attitude and interest in learning. We also noticed that most of the children had extensive knowledge of the archaeological remains found within their community. Therefore, emphasis was placed on the laws protecting archaeological heritage, caring for their heritage, and the importance of disseminating information within their community to help protect archaeological heritage, as well as how these archaeological remains helped them build their cultural identity.

The second application experience took place at the Museum of Anthropology, as part of the Sunday program, "Cuates del MAX." This was a totally different experience from the previous one, as these were children who had already been exposed to archaeological remains through guided tours inside the museum. This allowed us to note the different perspectives they already had on archaeology and their cultural identity. However, we observed that the interaction of seeing the archaeological remains in a display case in the museum, as opposed to being able to actively interact with them, maintained a greater interest and enthusiasm for learning, prompting them to question themselves about what their role as citizens could be in helping to disseminate archaeological heritage. There was great interest in learning about archaeological work, the methodologies used, and how archaeology could contribute to the care of heritage, from the moment an archaeological excavation was carried out to its preservation in a museum. The children were very active and interested in learning. We could see that they fully understood the relationship between the activity and the archaeological remains housed in the anthropology museum and how their protection is important for the care of heritage.

Finally, in the third experiment, carried out within the framework of the "Veracruz National Children's and Youth Book Fair," the application was used by children from many different social backgrounds and levels of personal development. Some of them had already been exposed to some kind of information about heritage preservation, but most of them did not know much about archaeological remains and were not particularly interested in learning about them. The application was used by approximately 300 children. Among the diverse perspectives of each of the children, a lack of interest was observed in the basic education system in teaching the importance of museums, archaeological remains, and the ability to identify their own cultural identities. Among the doubts they expressed were whether the activity or the archaeological remains were truly important in their daily lives and personal development. A fundamental part of the workshop was the interaction with the parents, with whom we were able to engage during the activity, observing their interactions with the children and the importance that the activity had for them as parents. The purpose of this was to understand the context in which the child was developing and their perspective on the care of heritage and the creation of their own cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the results of this research, it has been shown that children are able to understand the importance of heritage and their cultural identity through various activities, such as simulated excavations for children and the creation of masks of the gods, generating great curiosity and interest in understanding how our heritage can be preserved and questioning their identity through archaeological remains. Given that this research was carried out in three different contexts, it was observed that the upbringing of each child within their personal context strongly influences how they view their heritage and the interest they show in the importance of dissemination. However, the methodologies used were found to be effective in enabling children to learn in a fun and enjoyable way, allowing them to understand the importance of the activities for their daily and academic lives.

A society's engagement with its heritage and cultural identity lays the foundation for collective memory, strengthens the sense of belonging, and generates social cohesion. Maintaining a connection with heritage fosters respect for cultural diversity, promotes meaningful educational processes, and contributes to the preservation of tangible and intangible resources that form part of a collective heritage. The formation of a multidisciplinary approach between pedagogy and archaeology provides us with educational tools to convey this heritage in a meaningful way. This collaboration allows us to design innovative educational strategies, such as recreational workshops, school programs, and participatory activities, which bring archaeological knowledge closer to children and a general public. This fosters interest in cultural identity from an early age and opens up the possibility for communities, schools, and other educational spaces to incorporate heritage as an essential resource for ensuring the continuity of values, knowledge, and expressions that enable the recognition of our cultural heritage.

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