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Cultural identity problems in contemporary pedagogy in Latvia

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Introduction

The changes in social, political and ethno-cultures that take place in the contemporary world create the subject of human self-determination in the spiritual sphere, and form the basis for ethno-cultural discourse. Value-systems - including customs, traditions, life styles and the experiences of successive generations - help mankind to prevent crises of social identity in an unstable world, over-saturated with information. Latvia is a multicultural society in which several ethno-cultural diasporas cohabit with the Latvian people. A crisis of social identity amongst representatives of the non-Latvian cultures might arise in the form of "acculturation stress" (Berry, 1997), created by the severing of the links between positive ethno-cultural identity and ethno-cultural tolerance. Recently several social scientists (Berry, 1997, Triandis, 1994, Lebedeva, 1999) have suggested that integration is the best strategy for overcoming such a crisis (integration in this context meaning "a tendency to save one's cultural belonging with the acquisition of a named ethnos or culture" (Lebedeva, 1999; 218)). The social perception of cultural distance becomes the core of the integrative process, and helps representatives of the ethno-cultural minority in building a positive local identity (e.g. as 'Russians in Latvia') which meets the new realities in the sphere of ethno-culture, social life and politics.

The creation of cultural identity is influenced by social, psychological and cultural factors, comprising two levels of cultural transmission. The prime level is connected with family and mono-ethnic surrounding; the second includes all levels of education, mass media and cultural institutions. Many parents from ethno-cultural minorities are now suffering a crisis of cultural identity because they could not adapt to great alterations in their social and cultural life; it is vital that the educational system plays a major role in creating a positive cultural identity among teenagers.

Unfortunately, the traditional models of education currently in use in Latvia does not equip young people with a world outlook which will facilitate collaboration with representatives of ethno-cultural traditions, customs and life-styles different from their own.

The essence of cultural identity

We describe cultural identity in the framework of our research as "an objective-subjective ability of an individual to detect and be aware of his cultural identity and integrity, when that integrity has been fully adapted by the ethno-cultural community where the individual shares common social, psychological and cultural values and parameters gained during a cultural transmission process; it makes the individual aware of his difference in cultural individuality that lead to intercultural collaboration and provide through space and time feelings of constant internal self identity and integrity into one cultural collaboration" (Chagilov 1991; 121).

Modern psychologists (e.g. Phinney, 1990; Stefanenko, 1999) commonly also include the following:

- a cognitive component (knowledge and concepts about the culture's individuality; awareness of belonging to it based on aspects of culture difference).
- an affective component (feelings of belonging to the culture, evaluating its features, attitude to being part of it);
- a behaviour/active component (real activities not only to belong, but to express oneself as a member of the cultural group).

While each aspect of cultural identity has its own features, in the process of forming a cultural identity, all components interact and interconnect. The integration of cultural identity helps an individual adapt to changing conditions and supports dynamic integrity with the surrounding world.

The alteration of the cultural paradigm coincided with the change of the political regimes in Eastern Europe in the 1990s and changed the status of the ethno-cultural diasporas which exist in the cultural space of Latvia. Ethno-cultural minorities are often unable to adapt to rapid changes in the economic, social, media, political, linguistic, demographic and institutional spheres, and the changes to, and loss of, ethno-cultural privileges were the main cause of the crisis of cultural identity referred to above. There are four behaviour strategies which can be applied to overcome such a crisis (Berry, 1997; Berry et al., 1992):

- assimilation (creation of a mono-cultural identity equivalent to the cultural identity of the majority through denial of one's own culture);
- separation (creation of a mono-cultural identity within the group itself, thus denying the majority culture);
- marginality (balancing between the cultural space of both cultures without real acquisition of the norms and values of either);
- integration (identification with both cultural groups – minority and majority).

It is possible to describe the specific features of local identity typical for Russians in Latvia, for example, by examining the meaningful dominants within the traditional structure of cultural identity:

- cognitive - knowledge of features of Russian culture in Latvia, of universal culture, of common and dissimilar guide-marks in Russian, Latvian and other minorities' ways of life and cultural traditions;
- affective - feelings of belonging to the Russian culture in Latvia, positive evaluation of one's quality, positive emotional attitude to being part of it;
- behaviour/active - the necessity and ability to participate in real cultural life in Latvia.

The status of cultural identity

In analysing different ways of creating cultural identity we confronted the problem of correct definition within the frame of identity's actual status for students. Cultural identity develops over a lifetime, during which some conditions and identities may change. This may happen when an individual no longer fits into the existing definitions of her/his cultural identity (loss or diffusion of identity); or when a person makes definite decisions about her/his life and personality, knows who s/he is and what s/he wishes, and adopts a definitive system of values and confidence (achieved identity). The research investigation

done in Latvia clarified the status of various 'types' of identity for students in minority schools (Philina, 2002).

Prescribed identity (or achieved identity for a teenager who is closed towards alternatives)

A teenager who possesses fragments of knowledge and notions about Russian culture, features of the Russian culture in Latvia, of universal culture, of common and dissimilar aspects of customs and cultural traditions of different nations may decide that s/he belongs to the Russian culture, but s/he does not intend to deepen knowledge of the culture and does not identify her/himself as a member of that culture.

Diffused identity for a teenager who is closed towards alternatives

The teenager possesses fragmentary knowledge and notions about Russian culture, features of the Russian culture in Latvia, of universal culture, of common and dissimilar aspects of the customs and cultural traditions of different nations. S/he does not define her/himself as belonging to a definite culture, or may identify with a foreign culture; s/he has difficulties making emotional evaluations about culture or shows a negative attitude; s/he is not motivated to search out values or to express her/himself as a member of a culture; s/he sees neither the problems arising from this nor alternative solutions.

Achieved identity for a teenager who is opened towards alternatives

The teenager possesses fragments of knowledge and notions of Russian culture, features of the Russian culture in Latvia, of universal culture, of common and dissimilar aspects of the customs and cultural traditions of different nations. S/he does not define her/himself as belonging to a definite culture or decides upon a foreign culture; has difficulties making emotional evaluations of cultures, but intends to search for values and to express her/himself as a member of a culture. This teenager can see both the problems and alternative solutions.

Achieved identity for a teenager who is open to changes

This teenager possesses systematic knowledge and notions of Russian culture, features of the Russian culture in Latvia, of universal culture, of common and dissimilar aspects of the cultural traditions and customs of different nations. S/he accepts the positive aspects of belonging to a culture and makes a positive emotional evaluation of cultural phenomena. S/he is able to socialise as a member of the culture.

We have described "achieved identity" as a positive local identity for Russians in Latvia. However, bicultural or multicultural identity is possible for some students, and is preferable for an individual living in a multicultural society, where openness to changes during in personal development could be considered the main feature of cultural identity. Cultural openness can be understood as an attribute of personality which describes the necessity of mutual understanding and the acknowledgement of the rich variety of global cultures. It also acknowledges the variety of different forms of the expression of feelings and individuality. Developing cultural openness fosters and facilitates the integration of national minority representatives into Latvian society.

Development of the cultural identity of the pupil and the process of studying literary text in its historical and cultural contexts

In the 1999-2000 research was undertaken with pupils from the fifth and sixth forms of a Riga school for national minorities. The aim of the research was to analyse the development of the pupils' cultural identity in lessons devoted to the study of literature. Four groups of pupils were examined: in two teaching was delivered in accordance with traditional methodology, and in the other two the teaching was based on an experimental methodology. The total number of pupils was 62.

The experimental groups studied texts in their historical and cultural contexts; pupils were involved in dialogues about the acquisition of cultural norms and ideals which were grounded on a close connection between teaching and the essential demands of living together with the interests and experience of the pupils.

Analysis of the results made it clear that the experimental didactic methods which involved the pupils in a multi-level dialogue (pupil – literary text – teacher – pupil) obtained better results, although some techniques were later corrected. Utilising the pupils' spontaneous emotional perceptions of a literary text improved motivation in addition to increasing the skills of analysing a literary text and acquiring aesthetic experience. The experience provided the basis for forming personal cultural meanings from acquired background knowledge and consolidated ideological skills and the system of values applied to culture.

The results of the experimental teaching proved that the development of background knowledge, dialogical skills and the system of values serve as grounds for expanding and deepening pupils' personal socio-culture experience, which in turn becomes the basis for the development of a cultural identity of an open type.

Conclusion

A variety of different didactic conceptions elaborated by modern researches and scientists are directed towards the integration of students from national minority schools into the multicultural context of Latvia. Their content includes bilingual education, a conceptual model of the school which includes an integrative "Lettonic" component and the conception of a European ethno-cultural model of school.

Bilingual education includes elaborated methods and principles and generates a sufficient academic level of knowledge of the Latvian language amongst students of national minority schools to facilitate studies in Latvian and other integrative processes (Druviete, 1998, Alyev, Kazhe, 2001). The conceptual model of school takes the school as a tool of natural and conscious integration of students from ethno-cultural minorities into the wider multicultural society through inclusion of multicultural thinking and behaviour.

The model of bilingual education motivates students to choose the strategy of integration in order to overcome the crisis of cultural identity (Druviete, 1998, Alyev, Kazhe, 2001). Diminishing the cultural distance between majority and minority groups in society is emphasised in the bilingual model as being productive for the purposes of integration into Latvian society.

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