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Multicultural education in Latvia as a means of developing a child's openness to cultural differences

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Cultural openness as a teenager's necessary personality feature

In this paper, the term 'cultural openness' is used to refer to the feature of personality characterised by the need and willingness of an individual to understand and accept the rich diversity of the world's cultures, various forms of self-expression, and different manifestations of human individuality. The analysis of the models of global and multicultural education has made it possible to single out the following components of cultural openness:

- understanding of and ability to analyse and interpret the universal features of culture; the concepts and meanings characteristic of each culture; the forms of expressing universal human ideas characteristic of a particular culture in its historical and global context;
- understanding of and ability to analyse and interpret similarities and differences in the customs and cultural traditions of the peoples of the world;
- perception and understanding of the fact that there are an infinite variety of views, customs, and habits;
- tolerance of other people, irrespective of their ethnic, national, or cultural origin;
- recognition of the value of other cultures; readiness and ability to accept cultural differences;
- the need and ability to conduct an intercultural dialogue, e.g., to achieve understanding and compromise among different points of view by means of explanation and persuasion without applying pressure. (Zinoviev, 1998; Heffe, 1991).

It is assumed that the development of openness to cultural difference will help pupils in the 5th and 6th grades to preserve and develop both positive cultural identity and cultural tolerance, for example, to solve the problem of identification by means of a behavioural strategy of integration.

The problem of the formation of child's cultural openness in school practice

The formation of cultural openness is a significant pedagogical problem: a group of schoolteachers were asked to select personal qualities facilitating a successful intercultural dialogue and qualities hindering such a dialogue, and to arrange them in order of priority. The group comprised 37 primary school teachers and 69 teachers of literature, whose teaching experience ranged from five to 36 years. The analysis of the answers obtained led to the following results. Most respondents consider the cultural openness of a personality (52%) and the command of the native language (36%) as the main qualities contributing to a successful intercultural dialogue (Table 1). Cultural seclusion is mentioned as the main quality hindering intercultural dialogues (56%). Most

respondents also mentioned failure to understand the need for intercultural dialogue as the second most negative quality (26%) (Table 2).

Table 1: The range of qualities necessary for successful conducting of the intercultural dialogue (percentages)

Quality	Score of the quality					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Understanding the necessity and benefits of intercultural dialogue	9	42	18	11	10	10
Openness to cultural differences	52	34	6	3	3	2
Command of the native language of the culture	36	18	13	10	12	11
Ability to acquire various cultures by means of reading in the native language	0	1	57	42	0	0
Ability to use the knowledge of foreign languages to understand representatives of other cultures.	12	14	13	36	8	17
Ability to obtain information about other cultures by means of reading in a foreign language	10	26	10	15	26	13
Other qualities						

Table 2: The range of qualities hindering the intercultural dialogue (percentages)

Quality	Score of the quality					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Failure to understand the necessity and usefulness of intercultural dialogue	36	26	13	16	9	0
Cultural seclusion	52	11	17	10	5	0
Weak command of the native language of a culture	4	25	29	12	26	2
Failure to understand the role of reading in the acquisition of other cultures	2	18	18	59	3	0
Weak command of foreign languages	1	20	23	3	53	0
Other qualities						

As most respondents considered cultural openness a major factor in facilitating intercultural dialogue, we asked the teachers to identify the pedagogical methods and techniques they used to develop these qualities in their pupils. Most of the teachers (47%) found it difficult to answer this question. A considerable number mentioned such general didactic methods such as conversations, discussions, and games, while not being able to be specific in terms of themes or problems (34%). These responses clearly demonstrated the necessity to develop a theoretically based approach facilitating the development of children's cultural openness.

An interactive approach as the basis for the development of children's cultural openness

The formation of cultural openness is impossible without the children's own initiative and activity in acquiring cultural norms and ideals. The components of cultural openness mentioned above presuppose not only the development of knowledge and skills but also acquisition of the experience of emotional relationships. In view of that, the following system of interactive methods, aimed at developing certain components of cultural openness, is proposed: methods of

- informational developing - forming the modes of mental activity;
- emotional assessment - developing the sphere of interpersonal relationships;
- self-development - stimulating the self-development mechanisms of personality;
- heuristic - developing creative abilities.

From a group of informational development methods, a research technique was chosen that involved modelling a problematic situation in the learning process, predicting the expected outcomes, and analysing and interpreting the information obtained as a result of problem-solving. During the experiment, problem-based discussions about the cultural roots of the similarities and differences between Latvian and Russian cultural traditions were carried out. Some comparative research into Russian and Latvian poetry and forms of folklore around annual rites was undertaken, and commenting on literary works by Russian, Latvian, and foreign authors.

From the group of emotional assessment methods, various role-plays with definite and improvised roles, the dramatisation of a literary work, and performing artistic dialogues from literary works were experimentally tested.

The successive use of these techniques, based on a literary work, was found to be effective. The first stage involved the work of the whole class: separate groups were designated ('dramatists', 'historians', 'artists', 'stage designers', 'directors') to prepare and perform the dramatisation of a literary work. The second stage was an artistic conversation 'in the theatrical drawing-room' where the performance was discussed. The roles of the participants in the conversation were the same as those performed while writing the play. However, the creative task of the learners was more complicated at this stage. Each group was divided into two parts: one playing the roles of the performance participants and the other being critics. The task of the critics was to express doubts concerning the treatment of the literary work, while the participants had to justify their approach.

During the experimental instruction, two research projects were prepared and presented by the pupils: 'Traditions and Contemporary Culture' and 'Christmas Stories in European Literature'. Students had to collect the necessary information (reference literature, encyclopaedias), prepare visual materials, and perform the creative tasks independently. The teacher's role was that of a coordinator and supervisor of their work.

For heuristic methods, the experimental instruction included such forms of creative activity as games and discussions. For example, a quiz was organised on the subject 'What do we know about the creative work of Russian writers in Latvia?'. Pupils were required to analyse literary works, to get and give interviews, and to review a

performance. These activities enabled the learners to obtain a real insight into the cultural life of the Russian community and become active participants. A round table discussion on the subject 'The ancient traditions I would like to re-introduce in modern life' helped the learners to understand the influence of the Latvian culture on contemporary Russian traditions.

Results of the experimental instruction

Observations of activities during the experimental instruction made it possible to draw the following conclusions. Firstly, students' knowledge and skills concerning the analysis and interpretation of the concepts of culture changed considerably. This was confirmed by the learners' answers to four questionnaires (two given at the beginning of the experimental instruction and two at the end). As a result, three levels of the skills mentioned above can be determined:

- low level – students have a general idea about the concepts of culture, but find it difficult to analyse or interpret them;
- intermediate level – students possess reproductive knowledge about the concepts of culture and are able to analyse and interpret them with the help of a teacher;
- high level – students understand the essence of the concepts of culture and are able to analyse and interpret them independently, as well as formulate their own creative opinions on them (Table 1).

Secondly, creative assignments demonstrated a positive dynamic in the learners' reactions to the diversity of cultural views, ways, and habits. The assignments completed at the beginning of the experiment often contained judgements expressing incomprehension of the behavioural patterns of other cultures and emotional intolerance of strange cultural traditions (40% - 60%). In contrast, most of the compositions written in the final stage of the experiment demonstrated an acknowledgement of the value of other cultures, and a readiness and ability to accept cultural differences emotionally (70% - 90%).

Thirdly, the communicative skills necessary for intercultural dialogue improved considerably. These were demonstrated in the answers to the questionnaires where students had to choose appropriate behaviour in problematic situations connected with cultural interactions. The changes in learners' behaviour, particularly in the discussions held during the experimental instruction, also showed positive dynamics in their ability to understand the positions and roles of other people, irrespective of their views and cultural origins.

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