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The acquisition of social skills for the development of citizenship experience

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Introduction

Social skills are developed and manifest in social interaction. In building a multicultural European Union, the social skills of every member of society are important for promoting effective co-operation in all spheres of life and in forming the experience of citizenship.

Social skills are also life skills, and the latter notion has a wider currency. In 1999, the European Regional Office of the World Health Organisation in Copenhagen defined life skills as the social and physical skills which, alongside cognitive skills, give a person the possibility of controlling and leading his/her own life, of living in a secure environment and of being able to change this. The WHO identified ten groups of important life skills: decision taking, problem solving, critical thinking, creative thinking, communication, self-awareness, interpersonal skills, emotion control, stress control and empathy. Faris (1998) considers social capital (trust, cooperation, common values) and intellectual capital (knowledge and talents) as particularly significant values for any society. The White Paper of the Commission of European Union (European Community, 1996) defines social skills as the ability to achieve mutual communication, i.e., job-orientated behaviour as well as the ability to take responsibility, to work and co-operate in a team, to be creative at work and to strive for quality.

Each member of a community needs social skills for the processes of social interaction. These skills are acquired and developed through communication among pupils, and between pupils and adults in the wider community. In Latvian schools, subject knowledge was given great importance during the Soviet period, when teaching dominated the study process. Priority is now given to a student-centred approach, and the formation and development of social skills has become more significant as teachers and students gradually move towards a learning society. The acquisition of social skills is particularly meaningful for teenagers, when their self-assessment and personality-building process is of particular significance, and they are very conscious of how their activities are assessed by other people and their peers.

Social skills in official documentation

The Conception of Education in Latvia (*Latvijas izglītības koncepcija*, 1995) emphasises the need to emphasise the practical orientation within the compulsory education curriculum, as the period in which students are prepared for independence. A particular focus should be thematic components of the compulsory curriculum which are currently underdeveloped: the individual in the world and the human environment (social and cultural environment).

Priority is given to the development of social skills in the primary school, which is achieved by focusing on the selection of content for study and on the selection of appropriate methods for study. The successful consolidation of both of these will achieve the task of giving every student the opportunity to control his or her life, to participate actively in social life and to be responsible for the environment.

The National Standards for Compulsory Education (Ministry of Education and Science, 1998) reflect the guiding principles for the content development in basic education:

- a changed focus from the acquisition of information to its application and utilisation
- a practical orientation, emphasising functional knowledge and skills
- integration and correspondence between subjects to avoid overload, duplication and discrepancies.

The educational process in the compulsory school is expected to prepare students for life, and students should acquire learning skills as part of this. The development of social skills characterises this preparedness for life: this no longer takes place only in the family, but is one of the main objectives of the study process at school.

The UNESCO International Commission's report *Learning: the Treasure Within* (UNESCO, 1996) focussed on the individual's potential for developing their personality and dealing with increasing independence, forming judgements and taking personal responsibility: these skills were defined as those of are memory, power of reasoning, aesthetic values, physical strength and communication.

Individual development begins with birth and continues throughout life. It is a dialectical process that starts with self-understanding and then opens out towards relationships with other people. Education as a means for a successful working life is both a highly individual process and a developmental process for social interaction. Better understanding of people through conversation and discussion is one of the most necessary components for education in the 21st century.

Social skills at school

The changes in the education paradigms found at the beginning of the 21st century, identified by the Norwegian educator S.E. Fjeld (1995), suggest that the main aim for every school should be to develop the integrated human being and students' social and learning competences.

A questionnaire to more than 400 students in Riga helped to clarify the social skills young people consider to be important. They are as follows:

- learning
- taking decisions
- explaining one's thoughts
- listening

- applying one's knowledge
- cooperation
- undertaking responsibility
- self-evaluation
- understanding others.

The respondents reported the belief that the acquisition of social skills is important and essential for their future life in the society.

Teaching and forms of learning organisation are important in the acquisition of social skills, helping to model different social situations and to use the skills of communication and cooperation. Group work, as an important tool for developing social skills, has been recognised both by students and teachers but unfortunately it is not widely used in everyday classroom situations.

A research study with 100 respondents showed students' attitude towards group work, and the frequency that it is used (Andersone, 2001). 91% of student respondents acknowledged that group work is used rarely (rarely, sometimes, very rarely); but their attitude towards group work was positive: 54% of respondents really enjoy or like it and only 7% of students dislike group work. Project work is greatly appreciated by 61% of students, and only 6% of respondents expressed a negative attitude. We can therefore assume that using group work and project work alongside other study forms would increase the efficiency of acquiring social skills in class. Although teachers think that students prefer individual work, in fact many students express the desire to work either in groups or pairs. In the everyday classroom situation teachers prefer using direct or individual forms of work: a very direct discrepancy between what teachers do and the needs and wishes of students.

In another piece of research with 700 respondents, teachers were found now to be more focused on the needs of students than was the case five years ago. However, the social and economic situation has changed and alongside these changes there is a focus on different types of relationship. The school reflects the surrounding world, and we need new forms of study, but it takes time for teachers to introduce such changes.

Social skills in the labour market

Every individual needs to acquire those particular skills that are essential in various spheres of life: at work, during study, within the family and in society. An examination of job vacancies in Latvian national newspapers shows that employers are looking for employees with the following qualifications (Andersone, 2002):

- knowledge of languages
- skill to work with the new information technologies
- responsibility
- ability to take decisions

- communication skills
- teamwork skills
- skill and readiness to improve one's knowledge
- positive attitudes towards work etc.

In order to clarify what employers value most in future employees, a survey was conducted among people working in personnel departments of companies in the USA (Crain, 1984). The results were very similar to those mentioned above. The following features of applicants were stressed:

- reliability
- attitude to work
- teamwork skills
- the skill to learn quickly.

It is evident from these studies that social skills dominate employers' requirements. Employers consider them to be important for building a successful team of employees. It testifies to the fact that the labour market forces everyone to develop the quality of their social skills.

Social skills and citizenship experience

During interviews carried out with 58 second year students at the University of Latvia, the particular social skills that students consider important for the development of citizenship were identified. These are:

- mutual trust (if people trust each other, they can talk about different topics without fear of expressing their emotions or fear of being misunderstood);
- getting to know oneself (this helps to understand others, their thoughts and actions);
- sharing a working place (one student commented – 'in the evenings I work in a personnel agency. I have to work with data. I deal with data of people that have applied for vacancies. There are four tables in the office. During the day all four tables are occupied. When I arrive at work in the evening, I work at my colleague's table. It means that we are sharing a working place and before we leave we have to put it in order.')
- listening skills (these help students to learn about other peoples' characters and to communicate better with those from different social groups).

Analysis of these students' views suggests that the purposeful acquisition of social skills promotes the development of successful citizenship, and should be introduced in school. This will help in forming relationships with peers and with others, and will also be significantly useful for life in the multicultural community that is the European Union.

Conclusion

The conception of education in Latvia emphasises as the objective of the education process the opportunity for each student to develop as a mentally and physically strong, free, responsible and creative personality. This development should be realised through the process of study, with student and teacher sharing responsibility. The efficiency of lessons will increase if different forms of teaching and learning organisation are introduced, and a variety of methods will allow students to develop different types of relationship, co-operate with their peers, be responsible for their decisions and actions, and gain experience of citizenship.

In 1933 J.A. Students (Students, 1998) specified the tasks for social education. He stressed that social education should provide a balance between the isolated individual and life in society. There should be balanced and different forms of organising teaching and learning, and these should be interchanged to match student needs in different learning and study contents and for different tasks. Each form of study has particular advantages and each has a different effect on the acquisition of social skills. The significance lies not in the form of study, but in its suitability for the study and educational objectives set by the teacher. One of these objectives is students' acquisition of social skills, which is also a means of gaining experience of citizenship.

As Fjeld stressed (1995), learning is most effective if it is based on cooperation that develops every individual. The shifting paradigm of the 21st century identifies four pillars on which education will be based:

- Learning to know – to have tools for understanding
- Learning to do – to cooperate creatively with the surrounding world
- Learning to live together – to participate and cooperate with other people in all spheres of mankind
- learning to be – to develop one's own personality.

The last three of these include social skills in their widest dimension. Social skills are necessary to allow each person to act, co-operate, gain new experience on the bases of existing experience, to be aware of their individual responsibility and to communicate with others. This is particularly important for teenagers moving towards adulthood, as they acquire necessary social skills and develop their experience of citizenship.

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