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Baltic Youth's Change of Attitude towards "The Other"

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Abstract

The investigation has been made in the frame of the project Multiple Choice Identity, looking at Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian youths', in particular the attitude of pedagogical students towards the "others" (those understood to be "different"). We used actual statistics data analysis, interviews and questionnaires. We canvassed the views of 500 students to find out the attitude of Latvian students with regards with those considered "other", their readiness to accept them, and their wish to change and the attitude to the formulation „others”. Findings reveal that Latvian youths consider their attitude against the others not negative, as every person is different. Most respondents also agreed that violence is not the acceptable in the family nor in the society or the country in general.

Introduction

In the Baltic States in general and in Latvia in particular there is interest in people's attitude to 'the different': in terms of culture, behaviour, interests, physical features, thinking etc. The specifics of the situation is related to a 50-year long totalitarian rule of the Soviet Union when a person was not allowed to be different as a matter of choice or express an opinion that differed from a generally established opinion in that country. Private opinions were expressed very cautiously and covertly since differently-minded persons could not foresee how their views would be construed.

In recent years, alongside economic and political changes, there have been multiple changes in upbringing, its aim and means. During totalitarian times the aim of upbringing was defined as follows: "a physically and comprehensively developed, morally clear and harmonious person". In 1991, when there were contradictory views in Latvia regarding the priority of education or upbringing, Zelmenis wrote that "in terms of pedagogy, the aim of upbringing is a comprehensive and harmonious development and a socially active personality – a citizen who would be ready for work and allegiance to the motherland, who has mastered the art of communication and lives a full life" (Zelmenis, 1991, Page 13). The majority of Latvia's population developed in such a system of upbringing, whose aim was the society, and a person – a comprehensively developed harmonious personality – was formed as a means that had to ensure development of the society. Now a generation has been emerging whose ideals and values are related to a democratic society with freedom, independence (autonomy) and responsibility as a core.

The aim of upbringing can only be implemented when pupils accept and conscientiously master a personal example of a humane educator, since authoritarianism, coercion and compulsion are external circumstances that prevent development of a humane personality (Špona, 2001, 49-52). We conclude that it is only for the last 20 years that our society has had a possibility of ensuring development of a humane personality and freely expressing attitude to 'the Other'. Therefore, as regards today's society and school we may say that a successful upbringing process takes place when a self-developing and self-regulating personality actively participates in his/her own development process. Joint thinking and joint activity promote changes in each person's self-regulation attitudes.

The Project

The investigation is framed within the Multiple Choice Identity project and explores Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian youths', particularly pedagogical students' attitude towards 'the Other'.

The study involved questionnaires completed by 101 Latvian students, 101 student from Lithuanian and 118 Estonian young people regarding their attitude to the Other. Seven questions constituted the questionnaire:

- Baltic young people's understanding of the notion "the different" (Q.1);
- Readiness to accept the different (Q.2);

- What would young people never accept (Q.3);
- Willingness to change something in their lives (Q.4);
- Attitude to the influence of the different on their personalities (Q.5);
- Attitude towards the wording “Off with the different!”(Q6).
- Question 7 invited the students to give their comments on the ‘different’.

Respondents were profiled in terms of country, age and course of study:

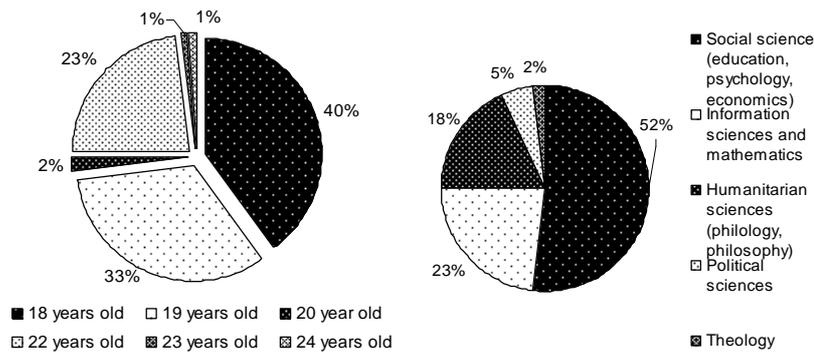


Fig.1. Age profile of the respondents

Fig.2 Profile of the respondents according to the study field

Data from Latvian students:

24 fulltime and 77 part-time completed the questionnaire. 5 of them were men, 96 – women. Mainly from Bachelors programme 1st year students: 7 students were from master programme in School management.

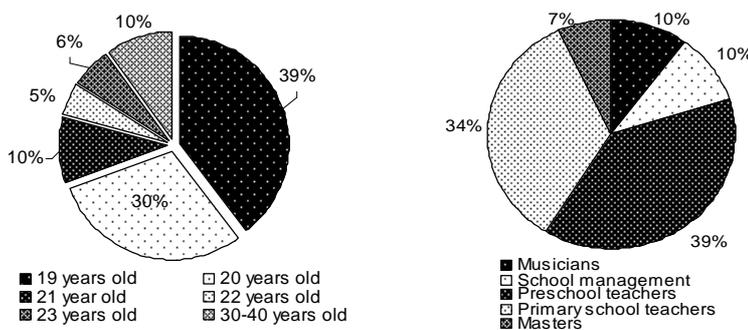


Fig.5. Age profile of the respondents

Fig.6. Profile of the respondents according to the study field

Question 1

Responses ‘defining difference’ may be divided into the following groups;

- 1) A person who differs from others: “It is a different person who thinks, behaves, dresses or talks in a different way. Differs from others in some aspect, is outstanding and arrests other people’s attention”, “It is something unusual, extraordinary, odd. Something that differs from the majority”.
- 2) Differ positively or negatively, be able to defend one’s point of view: “ I understand something differing from the big masses (collective), from something generally accepted, from the ideas of some group of people, from usual and ordinary things”.
- 3) Another mentality (The Others are people differing in their views, norms of behaviour, thinking): “The particular (different) is not always that unacceptable, it is rather we make it so. ,, The Others are individuals who think, act, relate, behave, evaluate the current situation (things, events) beyond the

established standards, look for solutions to a unified goal, substantiate and defend their opinion differing from the rest. Are not afraid to be different, unusual”.

4) Illnesses, dependences, needs: “*Those may also be sick people with various health problems that prevent them from having equal positions in the society.*”

5) Another ‘race’: “*The Others are people of another race with different skin colour and traditions’*

6) Those of different gender or sexual orientation

7) Followers of various beliefs or members of sects, dissidents.

6) Creative personalities: “*The Others is something that brings about progress, develops this world”*,

7) Alien, extraordinary.

The answers to **Question 2** are very diversified and dissimilar and reflect discussions in different groups, for example, in Group 1 some respondents considered “*everyone is different*” and therefore readily accept difference. In Group 2, some accept *The Others* upon consideration while others would accept *The Others* unless it bothers, gets on one’s nerves, presses its opinion. In another group respondents believe that they can accept others gradually, while for others it clearly depend on what the difference was, for example some could not readily accept “*other gender orientation*”, or if it offends God or the family. Only one respondent was categorical in declaring “*No, I am not ready to accept The Others*”.

Question 3: Opinions received:

1) 14 respondents believe that there are no unacceptable things, never say never;

2) 15 respondents mention unacceptable things: violence, maniacs, alcoholics; war, aggression, slavery; criminals, dangerous people; chaos; injustice, abuse of children;

3) 12 respondents believe that unacceptable are sexual minorities, homosexual marriages, demonstrations of sexual minorities.

4) 7 respondents are against drug addiction, laziness, aimlessness;

5) 2 respondents cannot accept Satanists, sects, negative groupings;

6) 6 respondents do not accept deviation from one’s principles, forced opinions, negatively disposed people;

7) 1 respondent does not accept aggression caused by mental disturbances; 1 respondent - monstrosity; 2 respondents – sneering at people with special needs;

8) 12 respondents cannot accept lies, betrayal, ill acts against the family and society degradation;

9) 10 respondents have never thought about that, hard to say;

10) 16 respondents answered as follows: to be like all the rest/alike; undesirable; destroying one’s self-consciousness; noise; something beyond understanding; something that bother other people; unacceptable for myself; against my principles, political/religious convictions;

11) One respondent writes that does not understand the question, one – there are no hopeless situations.

Question 4:

A group of 14 respondents would not change anything in their lives. Others cited that they would like to change their profession; to solve problems in the family; change their attitude to: family; to organize themselves and to live a less stressful life; change country; the past

Question 5:

35 respondents were not affected. For 3 respondents family upbringing is decisive. 12 respondents were affected by sick people and that made them think of The Others. 3 respondents have had little contact with The Others; everyone is a personality. 6 respondents protect their families from the influence of The Others. 28 respondents showed a positive attitude to the influence of The Others: Eye-opener (3), Good influence (1), Inspired interest (1), Tolerance (1), World outlook (1), Toleration, discipline, positively (8), understanding (5). Impure pronunciation and foreign accent were mentioned as negative effect (1). The group of 10 respondents think about their studies, behaviour, looks, so that „they could live as they want”, „Looks may differ, but the content is the same”.

Question 6. Your attitude to slogan „down with otherwise-minded”?

33 respondents disagree to the slogan; 3 respondents reacted negatively to the slogan; 5 had a neutral reaction, and one respondent – no reaction at all. 1 respondent agreed to the slogan at the first moment. There are laconic judgments: If someone took a negative direction, one must listen to it (1); Gays and lesbians do not bother; off with the drug addicts: (1) There are various situations – in the opinion of 6 respondents; he is not understood (1). Groundless statement, each generation differs (2).

Wrong idea; one must learn to respect and appreciate others (2). Anyone may become different (1). The slogan means segregation into social layers (2); Each person has his/her choice (1). Each person has rights: (6). 10 respondents believe that the slogan is absurd; one finds it insulting, and 2 think that all is OK unless the slogan relates to them personally.

Question 7. Your comments. 44 respondents had no comments. 2 found the questionnaire complicated (19) and incomprehensible (56), 1 thanked for the materials (62) and 2 - for the opportunity to get an insight into such an important issue (17 and 55); one respondent wished the questionnaire brought about something positive; Respondent 51 had diversified opinions: a person must be elastic in today's world. People must be elastic in today's world, More and more innovations – are emerging both in terms of technology and people's life (30) We all are unique in this world, therefore – 'The Others', and that is the most wonderful thing that can ever be - difference (61). The God's ideas are important. Homosexuality was not designed by the God. A family is a woman and a man, also children (77) I think it is wrong for the mass media to pay so much attention to such events as gays and lesbians' demonstrations since it only irritates other people and arouses negative emotions (96) My own action or attitudes in some situations is 'different'. Therefore, it is easier for me to understand such people's actions, behaviour, attitudes. Let's meet the Others! Thereby we will learn more about ourselves and understand that The Others are in each of us and in all of us (101).

Data from Lithuanian and Estonian students:

In Lithuania young people were asked discuss among themselves in groups of 4 and 5) about the questions formulated and provide their consolidated answers in a written form. An hour was allocated for both exercises. Later a *Content analysis* was performed of the interviews, when an opinion was considered to be a unit.

In Estonia 118 respondents from University of Tartu, who contributed in an open ended interview (in a written form), 89 of them were women, and 29 men.

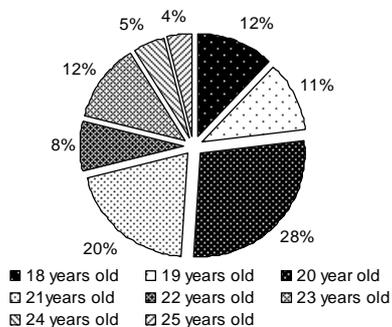


Fig.3. Age profile of the respondents

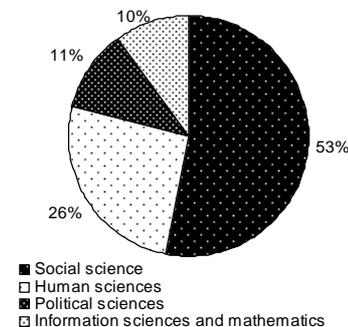


Fig.4. Study field of Estonian respondents

Question 1. What do you understand by definition the others“?

Physical state: Lit. 19; Est. 4 resp.: „It is negative attitudes to persons with physical disabilities“
Category ignored by community due to different reasons: because of Lithuania (Lit) Total no. of opinions 81; Estonia (Est) 35 Subcategories: Appearance, attitude, values. Lit. 29; Est. 19 resp.: „It can be group of people, who are different from majority, who have different attitude to life“
Self-excluded people Total No. of opinions Lit. 15; Est. 21; Subcategories: „Self-excluded people“
Religion, nationality, language: Lit. 23; Est. 9 „The others“ are the group of people, who are ignored because of their religion, nationality, language. Lit. 9; Est. 2 resp.: „Person can belong to „the others“ group because he or she wants to be „the others“ nationality different life-style“.
Social – economic situation (poverty): Lit. 10; Est. 3 resp.: „The others“ are also people who are in the grip of poverty, and because of that they can not function normally in social environment (they are unemployed, asocial) „...who are excluded because of their social economical status“

Question 2. Are you ready to accept “the others” or otherwise minded people?

Category Yes Total No. of opinions from Lit. 45; Est. 73
Subcategory
Different is good: Lit.: 1 „I was an exchange student for one year and I’ve met people from all over the world and some of them I would really call „the others“; nevertheless I came along quite well with them and I am still in touch with them“ 5 Lit., 4 Est.: „ Yes, I am ready to accept „the others“, because communication with them enrich personalities of both sides“ 15 Lit, 5 Est. resp.: „We all are different from each other. There are no two people who would be identically the same. So everyone of us can be called „the others“. But it doesn’t make trouble to communicate with each other.“ 10 Lit., 6 Est. „ Sometimes „the others“ ar more interesting and clever than majority“
We all are all equal: 5 Lit., 45 Est. resp.: „There are existing social differences, but they should be tolerated, because we all are equal“ 9 Lit., 7 Est. resp.“ The others“ are people like we are“ 6 Est. resp.: „I accept the others because I may be also different from the viewpoint of taking other people“
No Total No. of opinions: 30 Lit., 7 Est. resp.
Possibility of danger: 1 (Lit.), 2 Est. „ People from subcultures sometimes are dangerous and not predictive“(„emo“) Lack of competence for communication: 9 Lit. resp.: „I would like to accept „the „others“ but I don’t have enough knowledge and skills how to communicate with them“ Opposing common rules: 20 Lit., 5 Est. resp.: „If they have different values, different world view and moral attitudes from mine, I am not ready to accept them“
Yes, only one condition Total No. of opinions 8 from Lit., 38 from Est.
Initiative from „the others“ 8 „I am ready to accept „the others“ when I see, that they show initiative to communicate with me. If person doesn’t show his/ her efforts to integrate in community, nothing will force him/her to be like we are. To be with us.“ 13 „I am ready to accept „the others“ when I see, that they show acceptance toward me“ 14 „I am ready to accept „the others“ except in one condition – when they are criminal/aggressive“ 11 “Yes, I can accept the other people, but sometimes I forgot it/I do not do it – I must develop this skill myself“

Question 3 . What would you never accept?

Category violence total no. Of opinions: lit. 40, est. 62
Subcategory
Physical: Lit. 20, Est 33,. „I would never accept if somebody would do something to harm other person (for example, it is sad that Muslims are allowed to beat their wives)“ “With „the others“ aggressive behaviour“
Psychological: Lit. 20, Est. 26 „I would never accept with prejudices towards people who belong to different nationality, culture“ „ I would never accept discrimination, nationalism“ 3 Est. Resp.
Integration of particular groups of „the others“ Total No. Of opinions: Lit. 44, Est. 26
Sexual minorities: Lit. 4, Est. 6: „I hate when sexual minorities are tolerated. I don’t agree with that
Prisoners/criminal behavior: Lit. 1 Est.15 resp.: „I would never accept, that person who made very cruel crime would be given some privileges. Killers, molesters should be isolated from community, that they would not do anything bad for other people“
People, who have different values from community: Lit. 5, Est. 5: „ …everyone has a right to be unique, but it should not contradict with common values of community“ Lit. 5, Est. 3 resp.: „I don’t like Muslim culture. So I don’t agree with their culture’s attitudes“ Lit. 10: „ ..with people who belong to mindless group, like „Emo“, which tend to extremities“
People from religion groups: Lit.15: „ I would not like, that people, who belong to different religion groups would be the moderators of TV shows, or participate in state management“
People who are mentally disabled: Lit. 5: „I don’t agree that people with mentally disabled would have a right to vote during the state election or would have right to adopt children“
Personal things 14 Total No. of opinions: Lit. 14, Est. 10. Intolerance to me
Lit. 9, Est. 7: „I would never accept somebody forcing me to deny my moral attitudes, values“ Lit. 5, Est. 3: „I would never accept, that some would ignore me as a personality „

Question 4 What would you like to change in your life?

Category Nothing for different reasons Total No. of opinions: Lit. 30, Est. 30
Subcategory
I like who I am: Lit. 10, Est. 3: „ <i>Everyday brings experience and I become such person who I am</i> “
I like my life: Lit. 10, Est. 15 „ <i>I like my life, so I wouldn't like to change anything</i> “
Lit. 10, Est. 5: „ <i>Good and bad events growing me up, so I wouldn't like to change anything</i> “
Satisfaction with life: Est. 7: „ <i>I'm satisfied and give all my best/my desires have come true</i> “
Things in myself (un-material things) Total No. of opinions: Lit. 35; Est. 39
Attitudes: Lit. 5, Est. 5: „ <i>I would like to change my attitude to the „others“. I would like to learn to be more tolerant</i> “
Lit. 5, Est. 8: „ <i>I would like to change my attitude towards life</i> “
Personality characteristics
Lit. 1, Est. 7: flexible „ <i>I would like to be more flexible sometimes, because I think that I am too plump in some questions</i> “
Lit.14, Est. 8: tolerant: „ <i>I would like to be more tolerant to „the others“.</i> “
Lit.10, Est. 11: self confident and active: „ <i>I would like to be more self confident and to trust with „other“ people, that I could communicate with people, who can not talk, listen..</i> “
Material things Total No. of opinions: Lit. 21, Est. 41
Economical situation. Lit. 5, Est. 16: „ <i>I would like to have more money, then I could travel more – I really like travelling and meeting new people</i> “
Studies, profession: Lit.12, Est.12: „ <i>I would like to change my speciality, or to have been finished my studies and have speciality by now</i> “
Appearance: Lit. 4, Est. 7: „ <i>I would like to change my colour of eyes, my clothes, to be more slimer</i> “

Question 5. Have you been influenced by „the others“?

Category Yes Total No. of opinions: Lit. 63, Est. 66, Lat.
Subcategory
Sympathy: Lit. 21, Est. 1: „ <i>I try to help my neighbour, to give her some food, because she is very poor, sometimes I see her in a dustbin trying to find some eatable</i> “ Est. 3: „ <i>Yes, it influenced me and I wanted to help them integrate into community, because then you understand that in some circumstances you can be the one of them</i> “
Uneasiness
Lit. 4 „ <i>My inability to communicate on equal terms</i> “ My thought about my life: Lit. 5, Est. 5: „ <i>When I met „the others“ I felt uneasiness and I thought about my life near them.. and at this moment I appreciated what I have and what opportunities I have</i> “
Rewarding
Lit. 1: „ <i>During those my exchange“ years I made some really good friends, we shared our experience and I think that in a way they changed my life after I came back home; I started see things in a different way</i> “ Lit. 10, Est. 20: „ <i>These people are like an example how to be so strong. Because when you try to imagine how you would behave in the same situations as they are, sometimes it looks that you wouldn't have such power as they have.</i> “ Lit. 10, Est. 22: „ <i>I get more knowledge about “the others”, about their lifestyle, behaviour. This experience motivates to be more tolerant to “the others”.</i> “
Unsafe: By supporting marginalized you are at risk of being marginalized: Lit. 4, Est. 8: „ <i>Even if I would like to help to „the others“, but there is some attitude in community: either you belong to majority, or you become one of „the others“</i> “ Because of non predicable behaviour of others: Lit. 8, Est. 6: „ <i>They influenced me negatively, because i didn't know how to behave and what to expect from these people</i> “
Total No. of opinions: Lit. 4, Est. 21 Do not understand „the others“ „ <i>I know about them from TV, newspapers and their behaviour and thoughts shock me every day and I can not explain their behaviour</i> “

Question 6 . Your attitude to slogan „down with otherwise – minded“?

Category Do not agree for the different reasons Total No. of opinions: Lit. 62, Est. 93,
Subcategories
Empathy: Lit.1, Est. 2: „ <i>I think we should try to put our selves in their position and try to understand why they behave or say things, which from our point of view, are strange</i> “
Multiculturalism: Lit.1: „ <i>Our society will become multicultural. We have to face it and to try to do everything to make our country (and whole world) everybody's home (everybody has to live in a harmony and understanding)</i> “
Support: Lit. 21, Est. 11: „ <i>We should help them and to fight not with them but with negative situations“. „ I think this slogan expresses discrimination. We should help „the others“ to be a full-fledged members of community</i> “

Integration: Lit. 29, Est. 13: „ <i>This slogan denies the principle of equality that all people are equal. We should help to integrate „the others“ in community</i> “
Learning from „others“: Lit. 5, Est. 5: „ <i>Everyone person can reward us spiritually</i> “ 5 „ <i>We should communicate with them and learn to be stronger and optimistic</i> “
Negative attitude: stigmatization: Est. 55 “ <i>This is a stigmatization of people. It is absolutely wrong!</i> ”
Indifferent attitude Total No. of opinions: Est. 7: “ <i>My attitude about this slogan is indifference</i> ”

Question 7: Your comments

Not all respondents from Lithuania wrote their comments and only few respondents from Estonia wrote their comments. But some of them expressed the opinion, that they liked the questionnaire and that they think that it is good to talk about this problem, because:

“It is very actual problem nowadays“ (Lit.15). “It is an interesting problem in recent society” (Est. 4)

“It makes me think about “the others“ and to remember them.“(Lit.5, Est. 7)

“It makes me think about my behaviour with “the others“ and to think how should I behave with them“ (Lit. 10, Est. 4)

It can be noted that respondents see better and more beautiful future, they “hope that the attitude to “the others“ will change. I will try to start from myself to be more tolerant“ (Lit. 5, Est. 3). So as we see, first of all we should start from ourselves. Another way how to fight against social exclusion is that „we should integrate person with different social status in a society“ (5)

One of the respondents from Lithuania provided an example of one’s experience:

„I was learning in a public school and I always felt some hostility to persons, who had studied earlier at private schools. I understood, that I always thought that these people are exclusive according to their financial status, but not according to their abilities. Now I understand that we all have abilities and talents independently of our financial situation. So I should get rid of my prejudices“.

Conclusions

Some respondents readily accept ‘The Others’, some are neutral unless they feel threatened either personally or their families. Unacceptable for Latvian students is abuse of children, violence in the family, society and the country as a whole. Unacceptable are betrayal, war, aggression, slavery, chaos, drunkards, criminals and persons endangering the public peace, drug addiction, groupings, “Satanists”, sectarians. There are several objections against unisexual marriages and sexual minorities. In their lives the young people would like to change their attitude to the child, people, close ones, things and life in general, and believe that moral values and culture are most important in life.

Summing up, one can say that Latvian youth elastically respect ‘The Others’. Since the Latvian young people took part in the *Multiple Choice Identity Project* and a deep study was carried out in the framework of Route 3. *Family and Friends*, part of the respondents believe that their great values are their family, friends and children.

It must be noted that more than half of the Latvian young people filling the questionnaires commented on their attitude both to the different and to the questionnaire, as well as on the fact that ‘The Others’ enrich this world, and on the elasticity as regards innovations both in technologies and in relations between people, however, they are against forcing opinions on others. There are indications that such a viewpoint as regards the different is necessary for public socialization. In view of the aforesaid, we may conclude that Latvian youth are tolerant and open to changeable novelties.

It seems that Lithuanian and Estonian students are more intrinsically orientated in relation to their attitudes to ‘the others’. That is, students rather refer to their psychological (emotional, and sometimes cognitive) experiences that were invoked by being exposed to ‘the others’, rather than to the ways to build constructively the relationship between themselves and ‘the others’. The findings seem to show that young people (in the beginning of their twenties) rather work on concept of themselves (also, on the way they might build their own relationships) rather than on the realities of outside world.

The study reveals that Lithuanians and Estonian experience encounters with ‘the others’ are rather positive, and even if several negative experiences were identified, these were rather an exception

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