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Educational implications: Complexity of learning in a multicultural environment

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Abstract

The paper concentrates on the importance of the implementation of intercultural education into educational institutions in Lithuania. The theoretical background is based on the analysis of human rights as well as on the disjuncture of the two closely related concepts: multiculturalism and interculturalism. Intercultural education could be one of the keys for the citizenship education as it creates environment where the culture a person comes from as well as the culture of other people can be reflected. The aim of this paper is to present the results of the study that was received by analysing students' attitude towards intercultural education and their experiences while learning in a multicultural environment. The results of the study show that intercultural education is still a hardly achievable process.

Keywords: multiculturalism, intercultural education, cultural interactions

Introduction

Cultural diversity and cultural heritage can be considered as main aspects for the survival of different cultures, their traditions, values and uniqueness. That is why 'intercultural education policy has an important role to play in ensuring their continued vitality' (UNESCO, 2007). Realising the inevitability and relevance of this process it is very important to analyse, explore and discuss different questions of intercultural education. It is not enough to analyse how a learning process during the exchange studies was successful, but it is very important to concentrate more on what was the experience of the study process and what is the complexity of those experiences while trying to achieve one common goal. Thus this paper presents the research results which reveal the relevant experience of the students who were learning in a multicultural environment.

The object of the study is – learning in a multicultural environment. A problem question – what is the character of learning in a multicultural environment? The aim of this study is to reveal the nature of learning in a multicultural environment.

The theoretical background was based on critical analysis of the scientific literature and other references. The empirical research data was collected in a form of structured written reflections and analysed using the method of interpretative phenomenology. This method is effective while trying to understand the informants' experiences from their perspective without preconceptions on one or other question (Lester, 1999). The profile of informants was prepared using the method of statistical analysis.

1.   Phenomenon of interculturalism and intercultural education

1.1. Intercultural interactions in a multicultural society

In a rapidly changing world where cultural, political, economical and social changes challenge traditional lifestyles, education plays a very important role in promoting social inclusion and unity as well as a peaceful coexistence. With a help of educational programs which encourage dialogue between members of different cultures and religions, education can make a very important contribution into a development of tolerant, democratic and lasting multicultural society (UNESCO, 2007). Intercultural interaction meets the needs for democratic communication in a multicultural environment. The term *multicultural* is very closely related to the term *intercultural*. According to Rey (1992), the latter concept emphasises the process but not the state. 'The term *multicultural* describes the situation – our nowadays society which is plura- or multi- cultural' (Rey, 1992). At that time an intercultural aspect is concentrated on culture and actions. It is closely related with 'demands of the interaction between different components of the society and not only states the fact but as well explains the methods and strategies for a future practise' (Rey, 1992).

Intercultural education should be based on the fundamental values and should have philosophical substantiation according to which an educational process should be implemented. Intercultural education can be grounded on the following four philosophical propositions: (1) most of the contemporary societies are multicultural and this phenomenon is getting more common, (2) each culture has certain features and the fact must itself be respected, (3) each culture is a worth, and (4) multiculturalism must be an assumption of interculturalism (Berque from Saugeniene, 2000). In a modern and democratic world every person has to be ready to live in a multicultural surrounding as life in a multicultural environment stimulates a person to learn at least two foreign languages, acquiring main communication skills and understanding which makes a person more mature (Zuzeviciute, 2010).

Non-implementation of intercultural education does not incite discrimination but the denial and negotiation of different cultural identities would be unfair (Nedelcu from Bolovan, 2009). Intercultural education should not be integrated into a curriculum as a new subject but as a part of different subjects' curriculum in this way just to broaden the fixed curriculum. The implementation of intercultural education in educational institutions allows each learner, irrespectively of her/his nationality, to retain their uniqueness and individuality by motivating to improve her/his cultural, spiritual and social elements of life. Through a dialogue with members of different cultures, learners have an opportunity to realize that every person is a part of the society that he lives in. Learners can develop   an awareness that a personal improvement is influenced by the relationship with family members as well as with the society that surrounds her/ him.

Integration of this process into a curriculum empowers learners to understand that education is not just about what the society is like. Education helps to form and

sometimes even change the existing society. (NCCA[1], 2010). However, education itself can not solve the existing problems of racism and discrimination. That is why it is so important to develop and improve children's intercultural competence, prompt the dialogue and help them to form their intercultural attitude and values already in primary school. When a person knows herself/himself better it is easier to develop a dialogue and to create a space for common activities that do not depend on one's cultural background such as discussions on relevant questions, celebrating festivals and sharing good experiences.

Moreover, intercultural education gives a better possibility to know and evaluate one's culture and nationality through the communication and cooperation (Tamosiunas, 1997, LGPC[2], 2010). That allows to understand that each culture representatives understand and feel culture in their own individual way. Therefore, cultural self-reflection enables a person to accept and acknowledge other cultures and, for this reason, the curriculum should reflect not only the complexity of national identity that is spreading in the world by demonstrating multiculturalism (Banks, 2004), but also to motivate learners to implement a dialogue, communication and interaction. That is why intercultural education could be considered as providing a privilege for travelling people who meet members from different cultures. Understanding traditions, values and life styles could be a big step towards the improvement of an intercultural competence and personal identity.

Summing up the features of interculturalism, it is necessary to mention that practice of intercultural education, which started from the solving specific migration problems, has developed into a modern and democratic educational model (Saugienene and Jakavicius, 2000) through which the idea of multicultural society as a worth is revealed.

1.2. *Integrating intercultural education into a school curriculum*

An integration process is the most challenging as it is very difficult to create aims of equal values because most of societies have different aims that learners want to achieve while studying at school. That is why it is a must to acknowledge teachers to be with different aims that are relevant to different cultures and to train them to integrate those aims into a curriculum. The improvement of intercultural education should be a must in pedagogical studies so that teachers knew how to choose suitable methods and prompt group work in multicultural groups.

For a successful integration of intercultural education an obstacle could be an existence of stereotypes what means that each person in this process has to be ready for changes and challenges. It is teacher who has to help to understand continuing changes which may mean that stereotypes existing from old times may not reflect the nowadays peculiarities of one's culture. Teachers have to be ready to deal with topical issues by motivating learners to discuss and share their opinions. That is why an intercultural competence is inevitable for intercultural education. Teacher first of all has to be aware

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[1] NCCA – National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.
[2] LGPC- Lygių galimybių plėtros centras (Centre for Equality Advancement).

of theoretical knowledge about other cultures and then s/he has to demonstrate this understanding through behaviour and speech as 'educational system can create hegemonic power structures which devalue, dehumanize and makes some social groups invisible' (LGPC, 2010).

Researchers of intercultural education stress that it is important to coordinate the complexity of theoretical and practical knowledge. A careless comparison of cultures by uplifting one culture higher than the other can evoke many misunderstandings and even accusations on racism and xenophobia. As every culture gives a big and valid input into a society by demonstrating ability to adapt to the environment and exists by creating fundaments for their future generations (Stevenson, 1994).

The success of intercultural education and the experiences that the learner gets depends on different levels: individual, family, social environment, institutional, national as well as international levels. When difficulties appear it is important to find the most fundamental level of the problem which is most often invisible. At this point, one of the main challenges appears i.e. how to discover and respect those fundamental values by trying to adjust them into curriculum that is prepared for a majority group.

A distinct and idealistic aim of intercultural education can be presented under the heading of 'the four pillars of education'. This aim was presented by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century. These pillars should be: (1) learning to know, (2) learning to do, (3) learning to live together, and (4) learning to be (Delors, 1996). The results of this research demonstrate if these four aims have been achieved.

The analysis of intercultural education demonstrates that learning in a multicultural environment is a changeable process with results that can hardly be determined. That is why the aim of this research is to reveal nature of learning in a multicultural environment. It is not enough to concentrate on the results of learning for academic improvement in intercultural education as academic knowledge is just a part of a whole process.

1.3. Model of intercultural education

Learning in a multicultural society itself implies intercultural education. However, it is necessary to analyse learning experiences as only the received results can prove if a learning process was intercultural or not. The concept *intercultural education* has two fundamental features: inclusion and participation, and learning to live together (Council of Europe, 2003). It is not easy to create a united multicultural society because tolerance as such is not something inborn, on the contrary, it has to be learnt. Therefore, the necessity of intercultural education is proved as it prompts to develop an intercultural competence which gives external and internal outcomes (Deardorff, 2010). Internal changes can be noticed when a person becomes more open, flexible and tolerant. External changes mean that a person becomes more communicative, understands her/his own behaviour and body language and tries to control it according to the situation. The demonstration of intercultural education can create the foundation for tolerant

intercultural interaction, living together, more active mobilization and wish to know other cultures. An active mobility is one of the European Union priorities that motivate people to travel, meet new cultures, share good experience and etc. The analysis of learning experiences helps to reveal how an intercultural competence is improving while learning in a multicultural environment. The definition of an intercultural competence accentuates three main aspects: knowledge, skills and attitude.

Intercultural education also distinguishes three aspects, i.e. emotional, cognitive and behaviouristic. These three elements are fundamental in the model of intercultural education (Fig.1).
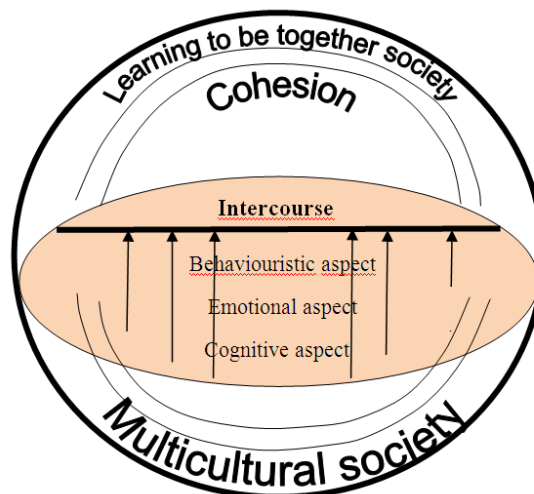

Fig.1. Model of intercultural education

Intercultural education can be the first step towards the creation of an intercultural society or it can be already an institutional foundation in learning to be a society. Despite that there are a few aspects that help to ensure a long-lasting solidarity of society. Firstly, it is a cognitive aspect that unfolds one's knowledge and understanding about other cultures. Secondly, there is an emotional aspect which emphasises internal feelings and personal features. Finally, there is a behaviouristic aspect, i.e. one's behaviour, actions and manner while being in a multicultural environment. It is not enough to know about other cultures, but it is a must to demonstrate personal knowledge accordingly with actions and body language.

A competence to live together in a multicultural society is important not only on a local but also on a national and global level. With a help of intercultural education nowadays a society can live and work together, communicate, seek for common goals, design a common future – create united but not a similar society.

2.   Results of the empirical research

2.1. *Methodology of the empirical research.*

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For the research 20 informants were chosen according to the criteria that were: (1) a participant should be a higher education student, (2) a participant should have an experience of learning in a multicultural environment, (3) a participant must represent different cultures and (4) a participant has to represent different age groups. During the research all the participants were learning in a multicultural environment in multicultural groups. The research was implemented at the end of an international course on inclusion (which is important for intercultural education) so all participants were closely related to the topic of the empirical study.

The main characteristic of the research participants is presented in following charts. 80% of informants were females and 20% males. Distribution according to the countries is quite similar (Fig.2).
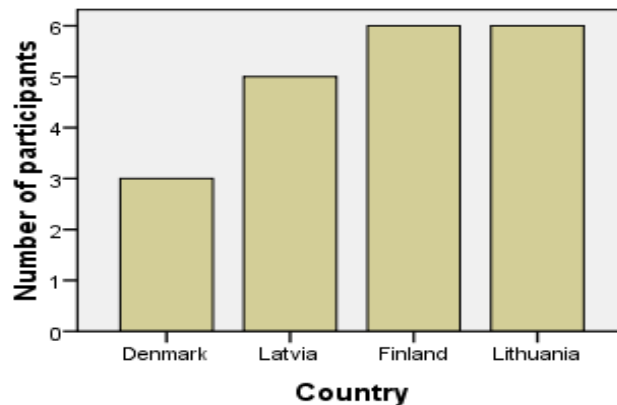

Fig.2. Distribution according to countries

Participant's age varies from 20 to 43 year, although 21-22 year old students constituted the biggest part of the group.
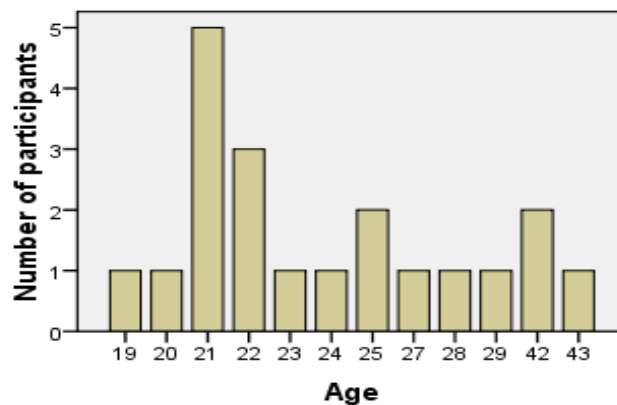

Fig.3. Distribution according to age

2.2. Methods and results of the research

It has been previously mentioned that the aim of this research is to reveal the nature of learning in a multicultural environment. For this reason a qualitative research method was chosen which helped to search for a deeper meaning in the informant's words. A qualitative method helps to understand, how people value their own life and how they interpret their experience' (Merriam, p. 14, 2009). The method of a structured reflection was chosen to collect data for analysis, and the method of interpretative phenomenology was chosen for the analysis of the received data. Lester (1999) states that this method is especially effective when a researcher needs to understand experience of the subject and to find a deeper meaning while analysing people's motivation and actions (Lester, 1999).

Initial expectations of learning in an international environment

As the theoretical analysis has revealed each learner has her/his own expectations while learning in a multicultural environment. It is possible to make an assumption that expectations while learning in a multicultural environment may differ from those that learners have while learning in a homogenous groups. Analysis of students' ideas enabled to identify the following categories and subcategories as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristic of learners' expectations

Category	Subcategory	No. of responses
Improvement of professional competences	To gain pedagogical experience	6
	To get more information about an educational system in other countries and their experiences	3
	To gain experience in a multicultural groupwork.	7
	To share experiences	6
	To gain experience in an international project	1
Improvement of social relationship	To find new friends from other countries	5
Personal interest	To visit a new country	1
	To know new cultures through experience	5
	To gain new experiences	1

Characteristic of learners expectations demonstrate that most of respondents hope to improve professional competences as well as to gain new pedagogical experience.

Skills and competences gained during an intercultural learning process
The analysis of skills and competences that were gained during an intercultural learning process can reveal if initial expectations were fulfilled and what aspects consolidated a learning process. Results are presented in Table 2.

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Table 2. Skills and competences gained during an intercultural learning process

Category	Subcategory	Examples of responses
Academical knowledge	Knowlede about inclusion and integration (7)	*'now I know the difference between inclusion and integration' (29 year old, student, Denmark).*
	Preparing a curriculum (2)	*'<...>learnt to create a lesson plan' (21year old , Lithuania).*
	Knowing other educational systems (3)	
Multicultural group dynamics	Difficulties while learning in a multicultural group (3)	*'learnt not to be afraid to say that I don't know something to my groupmates' (20year old, Lithuania).*
	Contraposition of invidual work and groupwork (2)	
	Close dialogue between groupmates – an assumption for successful work (3)	
Improvement of intercultural competence	Knowing other countries and cultures (4)	*'Saying "All equal-All different" is clearer to me now' (25year old, Finland)*
	Tolerance (6)	
Challenges	Cultural differences (2)	*'Everyone's mother tongue is different that's why we have some communication problems and barriers' (27 year old, Finland).*
	Language barrier (1)	
	Organisational difficulties (1)	

Peculiarities of a learning process
Table 3 shows peculiarities of a learning process that informants have highlighted.

Table 3. Peculiarities of a learning process

Category	Subcategory	Total
Organisational aspects	Differences of educational systems (2)	11
	Effectiveness of learning process(5)	
	Difficulties of learning process (2)	
	Social games (2)	
Challenges of learning in a multicultural environment	Age difference (2)	29
	Challenges in a multicultural groupwork (9)	
	Different experience and background (5)	
	Different ideas and attitudes (2)	
	Language barrier (8)	
Aspects for ensuring a successful learning process	Support from national team (1)	4
	Respect to groupmates (2)	
	Self-confidence (1)	

Results demonstrate that learners in multicultural courses would firstly identify challenges and barriers that they had to overcome rather than advantages.

Aspects for ensuring an effective intercultural education
In a theoretical model of intercultural education three main elements were emphasised. Informants were asked to share their opinions about the aspects that might ensure a successful learning process in a multicultural environment.

Table 4. Aspects for ensuring an effective intercultural education

Category	Subcategory	Examples of responses
Individual level	Self-understanding	*'Learning here you have to be with open heart and ready to accept other people because that helps to broaden worldview and break old steady stereotypes' (28 year old, Finland).*
	Personal character	
	Need for knowledge	
Institutional level	Educational validity	*'It's necessary to leaders [lecturers]to know enough about peculiarities of working and communicating in multicultural groups so that they can avoid unpleasant situations' (25year old, Finland).*
	Educational qualification	
National level	Development of social closeness	*'Most important it is to create a dialogue and communicate. Only then a connection between group members will appear and will allow to have a great relationship. So understanding and support is very important here' (21year old, Lithuania).*
International level	Political cooperation	*'for an intercultural education it's not enough for teacher and learner to work together, cooperation between countries is very important here, too. An international relationship, I think, can influence the success of intercultural education as well' (22 year old, Latvia).*

The   analysis above reveals that majority of aspects were mentioned at an individual level. It shows that intercultural education has to be implemented by every individual which proves theoretical ideas. While developing an intercultural competence at the individual level stereotypes that usually create invisible barrier among cultures are broken. At this level a personal character is very important as it can help to overcome obstacles and create space for communication, cooperation and understanding.

Challenges of intercultural education
The absence of an intercultural competence can cause an unpleasant feeling in majority as well as in minority cultural groups. Intercultural education requires specific sensitivity and consideration for everything that is going around. Difficulties and challenges of learning in a multicultural environment are revealed in table 5.

Table 5. Challenges of intercultural education

Category	Subcategory (no.of repsonses)	Examples of responses
Behaviouristic aspect	Antithesis of verbal and non-verbal communication (2)	*'Language barrier <...> can even help because then you learn to use non-verbal communication' (22 year old, Latvia)*
	Responsibility for results (2)	*'unwillingness to work for a final result and a not serious attitude towards tasks made a whole process more complicated' (29 year old, Denmark)*
Cognitive aspect	Language barrier (15)	*'Language barrier and preconceived stereotypes created a negative atmosphere and demotivated to work in multicultural teams'(23 year old, Finland)*
	Experience (5)	
	Lack of social skills (3)	
Emotional aspect	Sensitivity to multicultural aspects (5)	*'When you value other culture then neither language barrier nor different traditions or values can be a barrier for a successful work' (25 year old, Finland).*
Principles of multiculturalism	Cultural differences (16)	*'Different level of education can become a challenge as in different countries they have different theoretical background and their "gurus", eg. Piagetm Ericson or Vygotsky' (27 year old, Finland)*
	Age differences (6)	
	Different educational background (8)	

Categories of challenges of intercultural education confirmed that three main aspects are an inevitable part of the model of intercultural education which idealistic aim is to create to live together society learning. Moreover, it can be noticed that most challenges appeared in the category of principles of multiculturalism. It reveals that a lot has to be done so that intercultural education could become a part of a national curriculum.

Conclusions

1. The concept of intercultural education involves not only induction with the cultures existing around, but it implicates closer knowledge and promotion of tolerance, understanding and respect. It must have philosophical background and be based on eternal universal values. The most important elements (cognitive, emotional and behaviouristic) of intercultural education are identified in the model of intercultural education where a behaviouristic aspect is presented as the most important because it is the most difficult to reach.

2. Results of the empirical research prove that the nature of learning in a multicultural environment can be defined as 'complex', because:

2.1. This experience provides learner with an academic and professional knowledge at the same time creating a space for self-reflection and development.

2.2. Learning in a multicultural environment develops people's cultural consciousness, helps to assimilate their cultural identity by evaluating it critically and understanding that other cultures are valuable and unique.

2.3. Knowledge and emotional aspects do not create preconditions for a development of learning to live together in a society. A behaviouristic aspect is the main and, as the results showed, the most complicated to achieve, sometimes even unachievable.

2.4. Learning in a multicultural environment develops the ability to accept critiques, to overcome obstacles and to realise that in this surrounding non-verbal communication is even more important than verbal.

All these aspects create presumptions for the development of intercultural education where a persistent dialogue, interaction and contact is the most important for the assurance of everyone's comprehensive security.

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[3]EAIE – International Education Conference.

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