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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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The development of multicultural identity among senior secondary school students in Latvia

*Mikhail Chehlov, Zoja Chehlova and Jekaterina Korjuhina
University of Latvia (Latvia)*

Abstract

The current economic and socio-political crisis in Latvia indicates a need to bring the issue of multicultural identity to the foreground. Unfortunately, the traditional educational models currently functioning in Latvia do not give young people the necessary foundation for productive interaction with representatives of other ethno-cultural traditions and lifestyles. The purpose of the paper is to give theoretical basis and empirical verification to a pedagogical model that aims to foster the development of multicultural identity. Research focuses on senior secondary school students in two national minority schools in Latvia.

Key words: *multicultural identity, interpersonal cultural dialogue, cultural component in the content of education.*

The characteristics of multicultural identity

Multicultural identity is regarded as a personality feature which refers to individual's need and ability to understand and accept the rich diversity of the world cultures, various forms of self-expression and manifestation of human individuality. The importance of this personality feature is based on the fact that it is focused on developing and preserving both positive cultural identity and cultural tolerance, which is a key precondition for solving the problem of identification by means of the behavioural strategy of integration (Berry, 1997).

There is no doubt that in the present historical-cultural situation when a dialogue is becoming a universal, comprehensive mode for the existence of culture and an individual in culture" (Kagan, 1996), the strategy of integration which restores the balance between positive ethno-cultural identity and ethno-cultural tolerance can be the guarantee for social and ethnic peace in a poly-cultural society like Latvia. Integration can be possible on the basis of the mechanism of the social perception of cultural distance which enables the representatives of ethno-cultural minorities to create positive local identities ('Latvian-Russian', 'Latvian-Byelorussian', 'Latvian-Ukrainian', 'Latvian-Polish') corresponding to the new ethno-cultural and socio-political reality. (Lebedeva, 1999).

The statuses of multicultural identity

When analysing the pedagogical ways of achieving multicultural identity, we faced the problem of adequate determination of its statuses, which are important for a student.

The development of cultural identity takes place throughout the individual's whole life; nevertheless, it is possible to single out several stages of identity, which succeed each other during individual's life. The most important of them are: the diffused identity or the loss of identity, when an individual loses certain meaningful reference-points and no longer feels the definiteness of his or her 'self', and the achieved identity – when individuals have taken a certain decision concerning themselves and their life and know who they are and what they want in their life, as well as have a certain system of values and convictions. It should be noted that in contemporary cross-cultural psychology the two-dimensional model of ethno-cultural identity is considered as the dominating one, which suggests two basic types of positive identity – the multicultural and bi-cultural identity (Berry, 1997).

We consider the bicultural or multicultural identity as the varieties of achieved identity.

The structure of multicultural identity

In the present study, we have determined the structure of multicultural identity and have singled out its dominant cultural-value characteristics:

- cognitive characteristics: the knowledge and notions about the specific features of Latvian and Russian cultures, about common and different characteristics in the habits and cultural traditions of the Latvian and Russian people;
- affective characteristics: a positive attitude to the Russian and Latvian culture, the need to deepen one's emotional attitude to various cultures;
- behavioural characteristics: the need and ability to participate in the actual cultural life in Latvia.

The pedagogical model for the development of multicultural identity in the process of education

The pedagogical model includes the following:

- the diagnostics of the initial level of multicultural identity according to definite criteria. The experiment established a low level of achieved identity among senior secondary school students open to various alternatives;
- the designing of strategies for organizing the process of education: changes in the content of education (introduction of the cultural component);
- changes in the procedural aspect of education (organization of interpersonal cultural dialogue);
- support and encouragement measures for the programmes of self-development.

The researchers have identified the key conditions for the formation of multicultural identity, which are regarded as opportunities for survival for the contemporary Latvian society at the same time:

- deep and comprehensive acquisition of their own culture by learners as an indispensable precondition for their integration in other cultures;
- formation of the awareness concerning the diversity of cultures in Latvia and in the world;
- the development of skills necessary for effective interaction with the representatives of different cultures;
- education of learners in the spirit of peace, tolerance, and humane inter-ethnic communication;
- organization of multicultural education.

Multicultural education emphasizes the interconnectedness and mutual enrichment of various cultures and envisages the acquisition of cultural and educational values; it is focused on the coexistence of various cultures in the common social space. On the one hand, multicultural education denies the possibility of the formation of personality outside national culture; on the other hand, it facilitates the formation of personality with multiple identity. Multiculturalism has to become an integral part for the professionalism of each educator (Dmitriev, 1999).

The development of strategy for the organization of the process of education

The multicultural component in the content of education plays a key role in the development of multicultural identity.

The methodology for the development of the multicultural model is based on the understanding of education as a form for the acquisition of culture and realization of its creative potential, as well as culture as the key condition for the development of personality and perfection of the process of education (Vygotsky, 1991).

The multicultural component of the content of education comprises a system of the following elements:

- subject content, including the cultural experience of mankind in the form of knowledge ;
- activity content, revealing the modes of human activity in the form of skills;
- subjective content, including individual cultural experience of emotional-value relationships, which manifests itself as individual's cultural needs, motives, and interests.

The development of the multicultural model that would enable the development of student's multicultural identity is based on the following principles: multiculturalism, the interconnection between objective cultural values and individual value orientations, and focus on a dialogue as a form of activity.

The didactical principle of multiculturalism reflects the multi-ethnic nature of the Latvian society; therefore, it presupposes that the elements characteristic of various cultures representing the ethnic groups living in Latvia have to be reflected in the content of education. The principle of multiculturalism also implies the implementation of the idea of tolerance with regard to linguistic diversity.

Cooperative research activity as a precondition for the development of multicultural identity of senior secondary school students

Cooperative research activity is one of the most effective ways for developing the multicultural identity of senior secondary school students. The 12th form students from two secondary schools – one Russian (Pushkin Lyceum) and one Latvian (School No 28) – took part in the experiment. These senior secondary school students carried out a joint project “The Career Choice of Senior Secondary School Students”. The project aroused interest because everyone could learn something more about himself or herself as a result of it. All the 12th form students took part in the experiment. During the school-year, the students had meetings with the representatives of various professions, consultations with a psychologist, and they had to complete a survey questionnaire “Career-Guidance at the School and the Lyceum”:

- What profession would you like to choose?
- Does this profession correspond to your abilities and possibilities?
- What are your accomplishments in the subjects that are relevant for this profession? etc.

With the help of a teacher, they identified the criteria and parameters of the career choice. The educational process of research activity implies two results. The first (covert) one refers to the pedagogical effect resulting from involving learners in “obtaining of knowledge”: in the formation of personality features, motivation, self-esteem, etc. The second result refers to the research work carried out. In view of these expected results, there was developed a questionnaire for the students. They had to complete it twice: in the middle of the experiment and in its final stage. The content of the questionnaire was “What do you find interesting in doing research work?”

School No 28 Pushkin Lyceum

- free communication among the participants of the project;	10%	15%
- the equal position of the teacher – the supervisor of the project;	10%	10%

- gaining new knowledge;	25%	25%
- interest in research work;	10%	25%
- deeper understanding of the profession;	20%	10%
- awareness of one's abilities and possibilities.	25%	15%

In the first stage of the experiment, the answers of both schools were quite similar. The Lyceum students had a higher interest in the research activity. It is due to the fact that in Pushkin Lyceum the students are involved in research work starting from form 10. Among the Lyceum students, there could also be observed higher interest in communicating with the Latvian students from School No 28. The participants from School No 28 were more focused on obtaining knowledge as a result of research work and on deeper understanding of their chosen profession and their own possibilities. Our goal was to develop interest in communication among the students from different schools, respecting their cultural differences. There was carried out a discussion "Intercultural dialogue as the means of communication among young people".

In the final stage of the experiment, the students had to complete the questionnaire "What do you find interesting in doing research work?" again:

	School No 28	Pushkin Lyceum
- free communication among the participants of the project;	25%	30%
- the equal position of the teacher – the supervisor of the project;	15%	10%
- gaining new knowledge;	15%	15%
- interest in research work;	15%	20%
- deeper understanding of the profession;	10%	10%
- awareness of one's abilities and possibilities.	20%	15%

The most engaging factor was free communication among the participants of the research activity. The students communicated in two languages, Latvian and Russian, choosing the one they preferred. They started meeting each other after school as well. The increased awareness of their abilities and possibilities was also important. For the students of School No 28, the equal position of the students and the teacher was a high priority. For the Lyceum students, it was a natural position that they had experienced before in the democratic communication style in the Lyceum.

Conclusion

In the present study, multicultural identity is regarded as an integrative characteristic of personality. The structure of multicultural identity represents the interconnection of three components: the cognitive, affective, and behavioural ones. An important result of the theoretical-experimental study is the determination of the pedagogical basis for the development of multicultural identity as the means for the consolidation of the multicultural Latvian society. The multicultural component in the content of education can serve as such pedagogical basis. It presupposes the interconnection of various cultures.

Cooperative research activity of the students can be an important means for the development of multicultural identity. The development of the multicultural identity of secondary school students also presupposes teachers' multiculturalism as their professional characteristic.

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