

MULTICULTURALISM AND INTERCULTURALISM: REALITY OR VISION IN TEACHING

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Abstract. *Today, the increasing mobility of people, globalisation and various political and economic circumstances have created a situation in which intercultural communication issues are more often on our minds. As shown on the Official Statistics website, of the 38708 long-term migrants who arrived in Latvia in 2022, only 5214 were ethnic Latvians, while 7758 were school-age children (Latvijas oficiālā statistika, 2023). The publication examines the experience of intercultural education in Latvia to date, keeping in mind that not only in Latvia, but also globally, there are different opinions on how much attention should be paid on intercultural education issues in schools. The aim of this publication is to analyse the readiness of general education teachers of Latvia to work in multicultural classrooms using the teaching methods, which require a pedagogical approach based on a tolerant attitude towards ethnic, cultural and religious differences between the people. The main research question: how much teachers in comprehensive schools are aware of intercultural education issues and willing to use intercultural education methods in their work. The study is based on the results of a survey of teachers working in grades 1-12 in general education schools. The research results lead to the conclusion that teachers' awareness on intercultural issues is not sufficient.*

Keywords: *intercultural education, interculturalism, globalisation, multiculturalism, students, teaching process*

Introduction

In today's world, which is constantly undergoing rapid changes not only in politics, but also due to economic instability and changes in social structures and cultural patterns, education is the key to a peaceful and respectful coexistence. Intercultural education, which includes awareness of one's own culture, traditions and values, as well as knowledge of other peoples' cultures and traditions and the ability to live in a multicultural society, plays an important role in understanding and accepting the differences and respecting the needs and values of others.

Different ethnic, social and religious groups have always been part of any society. Inclusive education issues related to intercultural communication in a multicultural society are becoming more and more topical to Latvian society. The number of pupils that have previously been educated in different educational institutions abroad is increasing in Latvian educational institutions. As can be seen

from the official statistics website, of the 38,708 long-term migrants who arrived in Latvia in 2022, only 5,214 were ethnic Latvians, while 7,758 were school-age children (Latvijas oficiālā statistika, 2023). Along with developing the conceptual understanding and language practice, these children need to adapt to a new country, a new learning system, a new language and culture (Schmida & Chu, 2016). The successful implementation of these processes lies in teachers' hands; therefore, the personality of the teacher is decisive. An "inspiring and informed teacher" is the bearer of important ideas for modern society (Jan, 2017).

The aim of the article is to analyse the current situation in Latvian comprehensive schools with the Latvian language of instruction, as well as challenges and perspectives in teacher's work in relation to the issues of intercultural education in today's multicultural society.

For this purpose, the following research questions are put forward:

1. What is the context for teaching intercultural education in Latvian schools?
2. To what extent are the teachers in Latvian schools informed and aware of intercultural education issues?
3. What challenges and perspectives do educators see when introducing intercultural communication approaches to the multicultural environment of a contemporary classroom?

Literature Review

Modern society is characterized by many complex processes of interaction: socialization, radicalization, globalization, multiculturalism, and many others. Everyone has one's own ethnicity, culture, religion. It shapes a person as a social being, shapes person's worldviews, behaviour, values, thinking, lifestyle (Margeviča, 2008). Changes in education have been promoted both by external environmental factors, such as the free market, the need to communicate with foreign cooperation partners, as well as internal environmental factors, such as changes in learning approaches and methods (Samusēviča, Iliško, & Rimšāne, 2010).

In Latvia, several concepts are used to define these interaction processes and factors. There are discussions on multiculturalism, interculturalism, intercultural communication. Multicultural and intercultural education are often used as synonyms, although worldwide scientific research indicates that there is a significant difference between these concepts (Holm, Zilliacus, 2009).

Looking from a geographic perspective, in Europe the concept of intercultural education is employed, while in the United States, Canada, Australia and Asia the preference is given to the concept of multicultural education (Hill, 2007; Leeman & Reid, 2006).

Multiculturalism has traditionally been identified as a way of describing diversity, specifically differences between populations in terms of racial, ethnic, religious, geographical, linguistic and cultural differences, in other words, as the recognition of diversity (Clayton, 2020). The main goal of multicultural education is that pupils and students from different social classes, races and ethnic groups, as well as different gender affiliations, receive equal educational opportunities (Banks, 2013). In reality, multicultural education is often described as a rather static process in which people with different backgrounds are in physical proximity, but not in interaction (Holm, Zilliacus, 2009). Therefore, the development of educational standards and programmes is often based on traditional, fundamental content, supplemented by information on multiculturalism issues, which Banks (2013) sarcastically calls "festival, food and dance approach".

The term "interculturalism" is used to refer to interactions and interrelationships between different cultural groups in a culturally diverse and changing environment (Hill, 2007). The concept of intercultural education appeared in Europe as early as 1983, when a resolution of conference in Berlin on the education of migrant children in schools emphasized the intercultural dimension. Observing the failure of integration and the lower level of education of minority pupils in comparison to local pupils, one of the tasks of intercultural education was to promote intercultural dialogue, that is, dialogue that is "open and respectful" and that takes place between individuals or groups "with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, based on mutual understanding and respect" (Council of Europe, 2008).

Already at the end of the 20th century, the phases of intercultural learning were summarized, and the purposeful acquisition of them in the learning and upbringing process helped to promote intercultural communication. Firstly, they include the ability to see the general relationship between human behaviour and culture, then to identify the standards of one's own culture and evaluate them in perspective to another culture, which allows to flexibly perceive cultural interrelationships and build constructive relations with members of another culture (Samusēviča, Ilisko & Rimšāne, 2010).

However, there is still a wide range of opportunities for intercultural learning, and the reality for teaching and learning can vary greatly from country to country. In Latvia, and also in other Eastern European countries, which have relatively recently regained their independence, the topical issue is ethnolinguistic vitality and preservation of national language. Thus, the preservation and spread of the Latvian language as an official state language has become crucial, because often the transition to politically and economically dominant languages is an inevitable companion to globalization and integration (Baltiņš, Druviete, 2017).

Nowadays, a good teacher is not characterized by good academic knowledge. Teacher must also have the ability to use his/her knowledge, personal, social and

methodological abilities in order to understand the basic principles and approaches of learning in the intercultural context. According to Guillén-Yiparrea and Ramírez-Montoya (2023), there are three competencies that are crucial for intercultural collaboration: intercultural communication, intercultural sensitivity and intercultural responsibility. This requires both professional and personal development. Intercultural education encourages teachers to critically evaluate their own culture, history, attitudes and values in the context of other cultures and build competence of “sensitivity or intercultural sensitivity” (Hammer et al., 2003).

Methodology

In order to achieve the aim of this study, the survey method using Google survey platform was chosen as "surveys collect data at a specific point in time with the aim of describing the nature of the existing circumstances" (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2006, 169).

The research base consists of educators working in general education schools in Latvia. The survey uses both structured and open-ended questions, which allow for an in-depth and detailed study of how well school educators are aware of intercultural issues and how much multiculturalism and intercultural approaches are used in their work, exploring the challenges for the work in intercultural classrooms.

The survey was organized in general education institutions in December, 2023 to January 2024. From 89 questionnaires that were distributed, only 37 respondents submitted their responses, which indirectly suggests, that there is not sufficient understanding and interest in intercultural education issues in Latvian schools. The survey allows making assumptions on the reasons for such attitudes.

Results

In a democratic society, the state ensures equal education for all, and the school curriculum is often based on the system of values that includes national language and cultural values. Changes in today's educational environment require an innovative approach from the teacher, focussing on implementation of inclusive education principles and on the development of communication skills and intercultural competences. The teacher must be open to change and to other cultures, as well as teach the students to understand and value cultural differences, understand their worldviews, as well as actively support democratic values.

Analysis of the data reveals that 35% of the teachers surveyed are aware of different ethnicities of their students. Most educators believe that when working in a school, the teacher should be knowledgeable on issues of multiculturalism and intercultural communication (91% of those surveyed). However, teachers'

knowledge about the principles and methods of intercultural communication is less optimistic. Only 5.4% of respondents state that they are knowledgeable and well-informed about intercultural communication; a higher proportion (29.7%) of teachers admit that they are aware of this concept, but do not know anything specific about it, but 59.5% of teachers say that they approximately know what this concept implies. A similar attitude is also observed in the answers to the question about the use of intercultural education methods in teachers' daily activities.

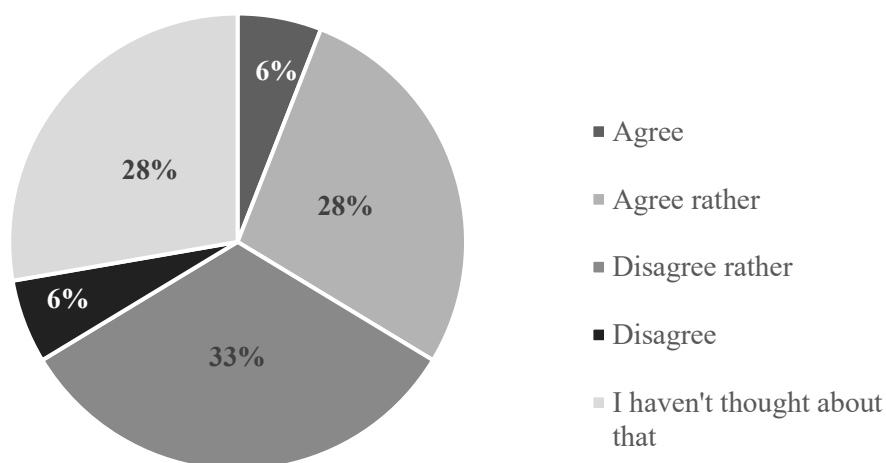


Figure 1 The use of intercultural education methods in daily work of teachers (made by authors)

When choosing methods and techniques for work in an ethnically diverse classroom, teachers point out that intercultural education is an education that prepares children for life in a multi-racial and multi-national society, where cultures are in mutual interaction and where previous experience of learners should be taken into account, especially if the child has recently entered the Latvian education system. When working in such a classroom, the teacher must be ready to change his or her previous views and attitudes, if necessary work methods, even the school environment, in order to ensure equal educational opportunities for all students.

As the most productive activities that promote intercultural dialogue, educators recognize special national cultural days (78%) and joint celebrations (73%), participation in international projects (73%), cultural heritage master classes such as folk dance and play evenings, cooking master classes, meetings with masters of folk crafts (70%). The Living Library method is also suggested with the participation of cultural carriers or biographical self-reflections of students and teachers themselves, because in this way the perception of 'the other' is formed, the pupils' horizon and the understanding of surrounding events is expanded. Educators associate the use of intercultural communication methods

with issues of tolerance, as well as improvement of language skills. At the same time, it is also a challenge to preserve one's own and pupils' national identity, so that there is no unmotivated acculturation or assimilation that could cause tensions not only in the school environment, but also in society.

As the researchers point out (Laķis, 2000), in today's multicultural society, tensions and conflicts are not only possible, but they must be addressed in an open and constructive way. In their responses, respondents point to the important role of the teacher in maintaining ethnic harmony and intercultural dialogue in classrooms with heterogeneity in the ethnic composition of students.

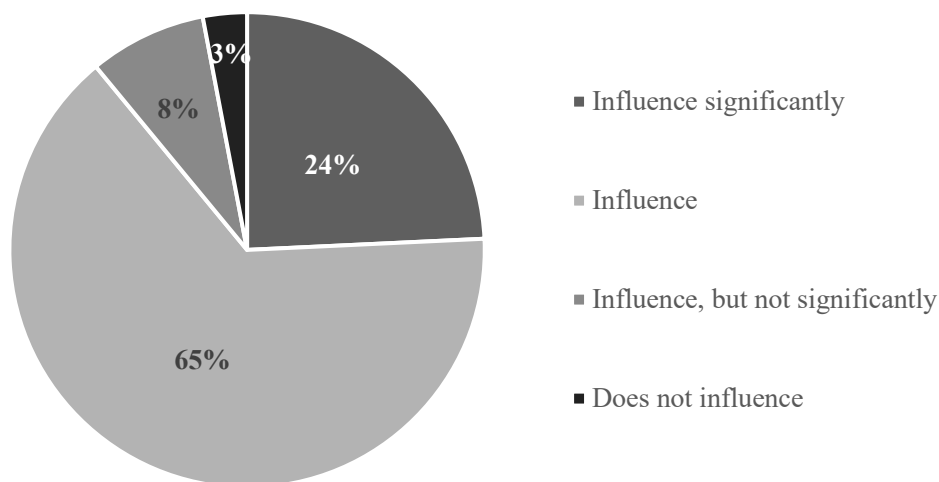


Figure 2 The impact of the teacher's work in promoting ethnic harmony and intercultural dialogue in classes with a heterogeneous ethnic composition (made by authors)

The respondents (70%) see the language barrier as a main challenge and obstacle to the implementation of intercultural education in Latvia, especially it became relevant after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when many Ukrainian children entered the Latvian educational environment. This was confirmed by the research conducted by the author in December 2022 in general education schools with the Latvian language of instruction, when 39 out of 42 survey participants – pedagogues indicated the language barrier as the most significant obstacle to the successful integration of pupils-newcomers in schools with the Latvian language of instruction (Birzniece, 2023).

Another important factor that affects successful intercultural communication not only in society, but also in the classroom, are stereotypes and perception differences (acknowledged by 51% of respondents), but 39% of respondents point to psychological barriers in the intercultural context. In turn, 15 educators' express doubts about their competency when teaching in intercultural environment. Meanwhile, fears about the political context have only been noted by 7 educators (18%), which shows belief in the fundamental values of the country and political sustainability.

The basis of intercultural competence is knowledge of the traditions and basic models of one’s own culture and of the principles that form cultural identities of others. The teachers emphasize significant advantages that the use of intercultural education approaches provides for the learning process.

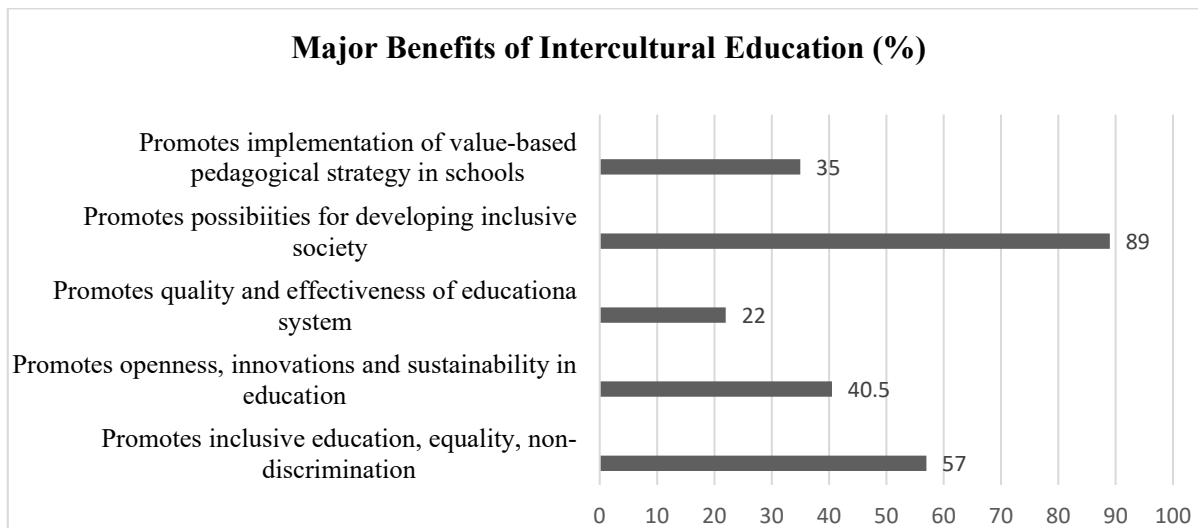


Figure 3 The major benefits of intercultural education (made by authors)

Most teachers have expressed the desire to improve their skills for working in an ethnically heterogeneous environment – multicultural classroom. 32 of surveyed teachers indicate that they would be happy to participate in professional development courses devoted to understanding of multiculturalism and intercultural education.

Conclusions

The globalization processes of today's world are felt increasingly also in the school environment. The goal of contemporary education is to help the learners to acquire a balanced set of skills that will be needed in real life, which includes the understanding of the generally accepted values in society, such as spirituality, virtues, respectful and tolerant relationships between people valuing each other’s traditions and culture. To successfully implement these learning outcomes, the educator’s intercultural intelligence is crucial, as well as a supportive learning environment that ensures this achievement.

Nowadays, it is not enough for a teacher to just be a good expert in his/her field. According to Tūna (2016), educators should be knowledgeable and creative professionals who regularly reflect on their activities and adapt them to the needs of children, take responsibility for their decisions, strengthen the sense of belonging and community, and promote social harmony and solidarity in an ethnically heterogeneous environment. Researchers believe that people who

speak more than one language and know more than one culture are more empathetic. The good intercultural education brings a change of attitudes, which includes ability to respect, openness towards the different, development of non-stereotypical attitudes, ethno-relative thinking, curiosity, virtues of tolerance and empathy.

This study confirms the teachers' awareness about the ethnically diverse classrooms they work in, but not always they are practically ready to integrate intercultural education approach in their daily work. They are more willing to point out the shortcomings than to evaluate the long-term contributions. This study revealed the insufficient knowledge of teachers about the methodology for work in culturally diverse classrooms, expressing the desire to improve their intercultural communication in professional development courses. On national level, some professional development courses are offered in the form of campaigns, for example, courses on intercultural education organized by Education Development Centre. But it is not enough. The development of intercultural competence should be seriously promoted during the teacher education process, providing the steady foundation for work in multicultural classrooms and multicultural society.

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