

## Capabilities and Pedagogical Risks - Multicultural Education in Russia



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### Abstract.

The ability of the educational process to help students successfully adapt and become effective in a multicultural society is becoming increasingly recognised as an important element of education quality in Russia. This paper will provide an overview of the current state of multicultural education in Russia and make projections into the future. The analysis is based on a multicultural education programme in North Ossetia, Russia, which was designed by Dr. Natalia Sinyagina.

**Key words:** *multicultural education, programme evaluation, tolerance, constructive dialogue, inter-ethnic relations.*

One of the pressing challenges in modern-day Russia, where people from more than 130 nationalities reside, is the question of nationality. The significant influx of migrants in recent years makes this issue urgent. According to the Committee of the State Duma of the Russian Federation for Constitutional Legislation and State, more than 3 million immigrants enter the country every year. Half of them cannot independently fill out any official documentation in the Russian language. One fifth do not even speak Russian. Less than 2 percent of immigrants desire to make Russia their new home. Most come to Russia simply to earn money to send back to their families. The situation is such that migrants come to Russia with their traditions and culture, without the desire to adapt to the customs and culture of the Russian nation. There are no guidelines or laws that would encourage people to adapt and integrate into Russian culture.

The study I would like to tell you about was conducted under my direction by a research team in 2008–2011 in seven federal districts of the Russian Federation. The goal of this study was to obtain a better understanding of contemporary interethnic interactions in the student environment. Our sample was made up of 2,500 students, grades 7–11, 360 parents and 216 teachers.

The sample was composed of 34 different nationalities. The results showed that 'alienating' feelings, such as resentment, anger and jealousy prevailed among students in relation to people of other nationalities. In response to the question, 'Is there a nationality, to which you have an aversion?' 83% of the students answered 'yes' 40% of respondents divided nationalities into 'good' (showing as examples, the French and Italian) and 'bad' (showing as examples, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Ukrainians, Georgians, Azeris), while almost 57% believe that this division cannot be made.

A distinctive feature of adolescents is their need to communicate. However, one in five adolescents avoids any kind of interethnic communication. 32% do not avoid interethnic communication, but do not seek to establish trusting relationships with people from different nationalities. They provided reasons to explain their attitude, with 36% saying that they 'reject either the lifestyle or behaviours of other nationalities', 30% saying that they 'lack understanding of the others' language', 20% explaining it as an 'inexplicable feeling of hostility' and the rest giving other explanations.

We also discovered that the opinion of the contemporary teenager, to a large extent, reflects the state of consciousness of adults (the data correlates with the results of a similar study conducted with the adult population by experts of the Levada Centre). For example, more than 25% of both groups find interethnic marriage an impossibility for them.

One of the major obstacles to the formation of constructive inter-ethnic relations in the educational environment is the lack of positive images of ethnic relations in the minds of pupils. Meanwhile, images play a significant role in multi-ethnic and multicultural societies. In a survey, 45% of respondents said that the main characteristic that defines for them a person of another culture is the colour of their skin, eyes, hair, 14% said nuances of their spoken language, 10% character traits, etc. In general, the responses indicate that children judge other people through their looks and external features, rather than by their culture and traditions. Over 60% of students surveyed do not know the ethnic traditions of others or the oral traditions of neighbouring nations and are not interested in their history and culture.

The prevention of ethnic strife would seem possible through education. However, teachers are also characterised by a high level of xenophobia (up to 54.3%) and a negative attitude toward a number of ethnic groups (65%). Moreover, more than half of the teachers expressed opposition to the introduction of courses in the educational process that would integrate teaching courses on 'constructive inter-ethnic interaction'.

Multicultural education assumes that we take into account age-appropriateness. In preschool and elementary school, we have found it effective to use methods aimed at exploring the sensory perception of life and raising awareness of cultural values and empathy. For example, with 4 to 7 year olds, it is effective to speak of 'good and bad behaviour', 'what is good and evil', 'friendship', 'honesty', etc.

Effective methods for adolescents include helping them form moral principles and choose appropriate goals and behaviours. The programme focuses on helping them become socially mature, active in civil life and able to evaluate their own behaviours and actions. The multicultural component is used to enrich the educational disciplines with multicultural themes, through special courses that reflect the diverse culture and history of the various ethnic groups.

For older students, it is recommended to focus on raising awareness of students' ability to analyse perspectives, situations, and behaviours on the level of systems and processes. This can be done through teaching, 'History of people', 'Language of nations', 'Literature of nations' and 'Arts of nations'. The goal here is to help students develop the ability to analyse and compare various perspectives on social processes and phenomena and improve the skills needed to have constructive interethnic dialogue and cooperation.

It is important not to forget that one of the key factors of a successful programme is the inclusion and support of parents, guardians and grandparents. However, this will not be a focus of this paper.

The aforementioned programme was tested in schools in North Ossetia (Alania). In the study there were 12 schools, more than 750 students and 27 teachers. After the pilot study, we found that 57.4% of teachers, 62.2% of parents and 75% of students had a positive experience with the programme, desired to continue their participation in the programme, saw the benefit of the programme and recommended it for other schools.

In addition, through the study we discovered several pedagogical risks. By the term 'risk' we mean the uncertainty that is associated with the possible adverse events and effects that may occur through the implementation of the programme. The most significant risks were classified as personnel risks. They were associated with the willingness of teachers and school administrators to implement the programme, as well as their level of competence and professionalism. To minimise this risk and address these needs, a teacher development programme was developed and is currently being implemented. The other risks found were related to the materials, content, and methods related. Specifically, these included the availability of knowledge resources and methods needed to implement the programme; and the readiness of parents and teachers to participate in the programme. As of now, the programme improvement recommendations have been published and a series of seminars have been conducted with pedagogues.

In addition, the multicultural education programme has been discussed in the research community and received positive reviews from all researchers and experts in the field who participated in the discussion. Furthermore, the Russian Ministry of Education and Science recommended the programme to educational practice. It is now being implemented in several regions in Russia. This programme aims to help students successfully adapt to the grown-up world, to help them become confident, active, independent, competitive and effective - goals by which the Russian federal education standards assess the quality of its education system.

Many of the societal ills we encounter today happen because people have not yet learned to interact constructively, to compromise, or to raise their children in the spirit of peace and tolerance. To teach these skills and instil these values - that is the goal of the education system and I hope that we all realise this and do our part to effect a positive change!

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