

THE INTEGRATION OF THIRD-COUNTRY NATIONALS IN THE LATVIAN EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT: THE CURRENT SITUATION AND KEY ISSUES

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Abstract. *Due to the European migrant crisis, the issue concerning the integration of refugees, third-country nationals, into Latvia's society has become increasingly topical in the last years. Since a lot of refugees are under 18, schools also must be ready to accept learners of other nationalities and cultures and help them integrate into the community of the host country. According to studies conducted in Latvia, the system of education needs to change the attitude towards the integration of immigrants in the school environment. Therefore, the incorporation of inter-cultural experience in the curricula of teacher-training institutions is a significant factor that could enable pre-service teachers to prepare for their professional life and the implementation of the approach of inclusive education at school. The aim of the article is to analyse the current situation and the main issues concerning the integration of the children of third-country nationals in the Latvian school environment and the multi-cultural Latvian society. The study is based on the analysis of scientific literature, documents, academic research data as well as student essays. Having analysed the opinions of 166 respondents, the authors of the article concluded that it is important to promote the development of a positive attitude to the inclusion of third-country nationals in the Latvian education environment in the process of teacher training, focussing on cross-cultural communication and the principles of inclusive education.*

Keywords: *attitudes, language, third-country nationals.*

Introduction

Immigration tendencies are becoming more pronounced both in the map of Europe and in the world, turning people's movement across borders into a significant issue for national and international policy planners. The EU immigration policy depends on global economic and political factors as well as

the national interests of the member states and the conditions resulting from the free movement of labour.

After accession to the EU, the flow of immigration from third countries has also increased in Latvia. In the period of 2009 - 2015, the number of foreign nationals increased from 49 871 people in 2009 to 84 037 in 2015. At the beginning of 2015, 51 029 foreign nationals with permanent residence permits and 33 244 people with temporary residence permits were registered in Latvia, with 23 671 third country nationals among them (Kļave et al., 2015, 2)

Among other branches of national economy, education is also subject to the strong impact of globalization and faces various challenges. The implementation of inter-cultural education and the development of the attitudes of pre-service teachers, preparing them for the work with the children of third-country nationals, have become topical issues. According to the data of the Ministry of Education and Science, 731 foreign citizens were enrolled in Latvian schools in 2013/2014, with 380 third-country nationals among them (IZM, 2013/2014)

The aim of the article is to analyse the current situation and the main issues concerning the integration of third-country nationals in the Latvian school environment and in the multi-cultural Latvian society.

Materials and Methods

The study is based on the analysis of scientific literature and policy documents as well as the essays of young teachers, who are also part-time students at the University of Latvia.

The inclusion of third-country nationals in the multicultural environment of a host state has become especially topical in the past decade (Trasberg & Kond, 2017; Bartkevičiene & Raudelitinaitė, 2012; Szerlag, 2017; Koiv et al., 2013; Mensah, 2010; Veebel, 2015, etc.) In the studies devoted to this topic, it is emphasized that Latvia lacks experience in the integration of third-country nationals in education, and an effective integration policy should be developed specifically targeted at this group (Lulle et al., 2008; Koiv et al., 2013).

Research data also highlight various problems related to the integration of foreign nationals in the field of education:

- the language barrier, the lack of suitable teaching materials, as well as the lack of skills among teachers working with these target groups (Djačkova et al., 2011: 10; Pičukāne, 2013);
- the need to create a supportive environment, reducing the intolerance of teachers and the general society to foreigners and raising the awareness of the society about the opportunities and the potential that third-country nationals could bring to the future development of the

- state (Indāns, 2012; Pičukāne, 2013; Bartkevičiene & Raudelitinaite, 2012);
- the lack of succession and continuity in the implementation of integration measures; the need for better cooperation between the society, the local authorities and the private sector (Kļave et al., 2015; Veebel, 2015);
 - the need for inter-cultural education, which should not concern only schools, but the whole society (Margeviča, 2008: 14; Trasberg & Kond, 2017, Szerlag, 2017);
 - the creation of a favourable learning environment where students could communicate, collaborate and feel safe (Pičukāne, 2013: 9; Rauhansalo & Kvieska, 2017).

According to several national policy planning documents adopted in Latvia, it is intended to implement various measures aimed at improving the education quality of immigrant children like teaching basic Latvian language skills to newly-arrived immigrants, motivating Latvian schools to enrol the children of third-country nationals and supporting the elaboration of additional education programmes for teaching the Latvian language to those children whose native language is not Latvian (Guidelines on National Identity, civil society and integration policy (2012-2018), 2011).

Support mechanisms targeted at the children of newly arrived immigrants and young immigrants are also envisaged in the action plan adopted by the Ministry of Education and Science, according to which financial support should be provided for the acquisition of primary education and general secondary education (Action plan for promoting society consolidation in the field of education for the period of 2012-2014, 2012).

Thus, the incorporation of inter-cultural experience in education programmes and the acquisition of the language of the host country are two key measures to solve the issues concerning the education of third-country nationals. It is also very important to apply the models of best practice acquired in bilingual education to the integration of third-country nationals in Latvian schools. At present, the aim of bilingual education is to integrate these learners in a new social space while preserving their awareness of their own culture (Pičukāne, 2013).

The key theoretical principles for most theories of bilingual education refer to the acquisition of a second language. Colin Baker (Baker, 2002) draws attention to special programmes elaborated to understand the role of a language deeper. Their aims are as follows (Baker, 2002: 297-298):

- to develop students' awareness of their level of proficiency in their first language;
- to develop language learning skills, advance communication skills in the newly acquired languages, promote students' understanding of the

nature and functions of the language, raise their awareness of the process of language acquisition and advance communication skills in the first language and other languages;

- to develop students' awareness of the linguistic diversity in the world, as well as their awareness of language variations; to improve relationships between different ethnic groups by familiarizing them with the languages of these groups; to help students overcome the alienation between the family language and the school language; to develop their understanding of bilingualism and multilingualism.

Based on the ideas offered by Baker, it is possible to develop language acquisition programmes for the children of third-country nationals and facilitate their inclusion in the Latvian education environment.

According to Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1991: 107-117), the ability to use some language successfully results in "enrichment" since it enables an individual to collaborate with others in various social contexts. The notion "collaboration" is closely connected with the notion "tolerance", which implies mutual interaction – the host nation should accept third-country nationals and show tolerance for cultural differences, while third-country nationals should accept the key values of the host country.

Several projects have been implemented in Latvia supported by the European Fund for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals. Some examples are the project "Support for School Communities in Promoting Tolerance and Intercultural Dialogue in Multicultural Collectives" implemented by the Education Development Centre (2017) and aimed at the development of a consolidated society by means of the activities of inter-cultural education, the project "Diverse Solutions for Public Education and Integration" implemented by the NGO "Shelter 'Safe House'" aimed at enhancing the competencies and skills of the people working with third-country nationals in the public administration, local governments and NGOs, as well as a project organized by Riga City Council in the framework of which teaching materials intended for working with newly arrived immigrants and the children of re-immigrants were developed (Materiāls darbam ar jauniebraucēju un reemigrantu bērniem izglītības iestādēs, 2017).

The main emphasis is put on language acquisition in these projects. For instance, in the project "A Teacher in the Intercultural Space", a set of modern teaching materials was developed by the Latvian Language Agency in 2011. It is entitled "Let's Open the Gate" and is intended for teaching third-country nationals, asylum-seekers and refugees. This set of materials includes the curriculum as well as different teaching aids appropriate for children aged 13 – 18 for the acquisition of the basic Latvian language (level A1), as well as the basic knowledge in Latvian geography, history and culture. It also includes a disc with e-materials. When developing these teaching materials, the criteria promoting the

development of tolerance have been considered, including equal opportunities, social equality, individual rights, positive attitude, support for diversity important for an individual, the sense of belonging, the awareness of diversity, equality and respect (Auziņa et al., 2011).

The project “The Support for Third-Country Nationals before Immigration and during the Adaptation Period” (2012-2015) also provides the newly arrived immigrants with the opportunity to acquire the Latvian language and improve their education by developing learning materials which are freely available online, organizing language courses and seminars, as well as competitions and camps for children (www.saziņastilts.lv; www.valoda.lv).

Results and Discussion

To clarify the opinions of young teachers on the issues concerning the integration of third-country nationals in the Latvian educational environment and the need for the intercultural dialogue, the analysis of the essays written by second-year part-time students (166 respondents) was carried out. The study was conducted in the period of April – March 2017.

Summarising the research data, it appears that most of the respondents (72 %) have encountered a language barrier in their pedagogical work with third-country nationals. It is the main obstacle hindering immigrants’ access to education, and the examples mentioned in the essays clearly demonstrate it. “Immigrants who want to study encounter the language barrier. Most of them have studied English a bit, but the Latvian language is totally unknown to them, and it takes a long time to learn a new language” (Elīna); “Our official language is a foreign language for them, so they have problems both with communication and the acquisition of the study material” (Jana); “It is difficult to include them in the first form together with those children who can read, write and speak Latvian. It is additional work for teachers” (Laima).

Even though serious improvements have been made in the inclusion of third-country nationals in the Latvian school system, including the increased availability of Latvian language courses and the accessibility of general education by granting everyone the right to compulsory pre-school education and primary education (Kļave et al., 2015: 100), the results of our study show that it is necessary to further improve language learning opportunities for both parents and children, as well as for people with an insufficient level of language proficiency by means of both formal and non-formal education (learning materials freely available in the electronic environment, summer camps aimed at language learning and integration, etc.).

A significant majority, 61 % of the respondents, mention cultural differences – traditions, clothes, food and religion – as possible barriers for the

integration of immigrants in the Latvian education environment. “It is difficult for immigrants to accept another culture, different laws and start a new life in another country and culture, accept this society and establish mutual relationships” (Baiba); “Immigrants’ way of life is different; their food is different, too. Due to food differences, there could be problems to have lunch at the school canteen; the habits of clothing are different. When Muslims arrive, and they are dressed in the clothes where only their eyes are visible, Latvians do not want to accept that in their schools” (Vēsma). The students emphasize in their essays that it is difficult for both parties to accept each other’s culture and traditions. Religious beliefs are mentioned in the 13 % of the students’ replies. “Most of us perceive refugees as the representatives of a religion alien for us – as Muslims” (Ilze).

At present, the Latvian immigration policy needs to tackle issues caused by the shortage of labour, and the general aim of the country is to reach the average EU standard of living as soon as possible. Nevertheless, the opinions expressed by the respondents indicate that their understanding of the potential of immigration is not always adequate. According to Indāns, “there is a contradiction in the Latvian refugee policy as the inhabitants are concerned about their national identity and cultural values; they feel threatened by international terrorism, which they associate with immigrant communities” (Indāns, 2012: 39).

The result of the study demonstrates that more attention should be paid to deepening the understanding of culture in its entirety both in school curricula and in the institutions of higher education and explaining cultural differences to enhance students’ tolerance for other cultures, develop empathy and raise students’ awareness of their own culture within other European cultures and the global culture of the humanity. Multiculturalism is a category characteristic of this time. It broadens the understanding of differences between individual cultures. Therefore, schools need to provide inter-cultural education to enable the young generation to acquire citizenship skills (Szerlag, 2017).

Thirteen percent of the students surveyed indicate that the stereotypes dominant in the society should be considered when speaking about the inclusion of refugees in the Latvian education environment. “Unfortunately, there is a view in Latvia that they (refugees) are not welcome, and they are referred to as terrorists and suicide-bombers” (Elza); “Latvians are afraid to accept refugees in our society because then the immigrants will be close to our children and might endanger them” (Laima). The stereotypes dominating in social media are often negative. Youngsters try to exclude immigrants because they have heard of terrorism and bloodshed” (Ilze).

The examples mentioned by the respondents could have stemmed from the exaggerations and prejudices against third country nationals created by the media. Although individual’s identity remains unchanged during their lifetime, it is modified in the socialization environment, where family, school and media are

the main agents (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Understanding the role of the media and creating a positive attitude to immigrants are the issues that concern not only teacher education (Pičukāne, 2013: 47), but also the education of society in general.

The issue of tolerance is highlighted by 21 % of the students: “The issue of refugees is a very sensitive matter in Latvia. Integration is a two-way street. Refugees should be willing to be integrated, and the host country should be willing to integrate them. Latvia is a multi-cultural country, but we are still not tolerant to what seems to be foreign and different” (Anete); “The key problem is the lack of empathy for refugees. The society is not ready to show their sympathy” (Diāna); “Perhaps children have had more opportunities to be in “different” kinds of environment in Riga, but in the countryside, where just “neighbouring” children study, there are no strangers, and it is difficult to accept differences” (Lauma); “Nowadays schools should pay more attention to developing children’s ability to accept differences” (Liene).

Students’ responses show that the young teachers are aware that a multicultural society whose goal is to achieve the recognition of diversity is based on mutual acceptance and the informed perception of a different identity (Margeviča, 2008: 36); consequently, the aim of inter-cultural education is to promote empathy as the ability to understand the situation of another nation (group) and look at one’s own group from the viewpoint of this other group, as well as the ability to fit in other cultures.

Eleven percent of the respondents point out financial issues: “I think it is hard for anyone without money; in Latvia, benefits are too small to make ends meet; after all, immigrants do not have a home, and it is difficult to find a good job” (Baiba); “Schools lack funds to educate foreign children. The state is not able to provide the education of our own children adequately, not to mention the families of refugees” (Sandra).

Fifteen percent of the students have highlighted the shortcomings of the system of education that hinder the integration of immigrants: “Latvian schools are quite conservative, and they have difficulties accepting different children” (Kristīne). Some respondents suggest that there should be special schools for immigrants: “I think Latvia needs to set up special schools for refugees to facilitate their integration in the society (Evija);

Seventeen percent of the students indicate that special study programmes and teaching materials are needed: “Children have been taught according to different curricula or have not been taught at all. Therefore, it is difficult to enrol them in the classes corresponding to their age, since their level of knowledge does not correspond to that of Latvian schools. It is also not possible to provide individual education to all of them” (Anete); “Personally, I would introduce a subject

devoted to foreign culture at school where children would get acquainted with the traditions and the cultural heritage of different nations” (Māra).

Teachers’ lack of experience working with the children of third-country nationals is pointed out by 28 % of the respondents: “Most teachers are not ready to work with the learners of different ethnicity, religion or even appearance. To work successfully, teachers must know the history, culture and religion of the respective country (at least a little bit)” (Diāna); “There is one Polish boy in the first form. In the second form, there are two Spanish girls. Teachers do not know the native languages of these children” (Juta); “Most Latvian teachers are not trained to work with refugee children. Teachers lack necessary inter-cultural and language skills to effectively include these children in the system of education” (Anete). Students’ opinions show that it is necessary to provide courses in intercultural education in higher educational institutions specializing in teacher training.

Eleven percent of the students have also indicated that the Latvian system of education should consider the low level of education immigrant children could have attained. “The level of education is very low among the immigrants, and they cannot hope to fit into the class corresponding to their age. For example, a 16-year-old refugee boy cannot study together with 16-year old Latvian students” (Kārlis).

Finally, 8 % of the respondents point out that the process of integration is also hindered by parents’ negative attitude to immigrants. “The problem is the attitude of each particular family which antagonizes children by saying that immigrants are bad, and they have nothing to do here” (Katrīna). “Parents also have to be positive and open. Children feel and hear what they talk about at home” (Gunita).

Based on the data of the study it can be concluded that the young teachers, part-time students, understand the inclusion of third-country nationals in the school environment as a great challenge not only for immigrant families and children, but also for educators, who must meet their diverse needs and show respect to each child. The respondents are also aware of the fact that Latvia has had little experience with the inclusion of these target groups in education so far, implementing the principles of inter-cultural education, and they are ready to work in the inter-cultural space.

Conclusions

Latvia has had little experience in integrating third-country nationals in the education environment so far. However, according to statistics, the number of the representatives of this target group is growing in Latvia. The language barrier, the lack of special adapted education programmes and teaching materials, as well as

the limited opportunities to acquire the basic Latvian language are the main obstacles that hinder the successful integration of immigrant children and youth in the Latvian system of education.

In education, it is important to evaluate the potential of bilingual education, intercultural education and inclusive education, while particular emphasis has to be placed on the language acquisition and teacher training, focusing on the development of their intercultural competency, as well as the development of appropriate teaching materials and methodological aids. Thus, a complex of various measures should be implemented to facilitate the possibility of third-country nationals to enrich the Latvian cultural, economic and social capital.

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