Cultural Differences in the Estonian Teacher Education

-a theoretical outline for the toolbox – Luleå, June 2009

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Multiculturality in a society is an inevitable and natural phenomenon, the formation of which varies in different countries. In Estonia and in other former socialist counties the origination of multiculturality is even more different from, for example, America or Europe (All different, all equal 1995, 9–15; Pavelson & Strasberg 1998, 23).

Special features of the formation of multicultural society in Estonia

At the beginning of the 1950s almost half a million Russian-speaking immigrants settled down (or rather they were moved to live) in Estonia (Lauristin & Heidmets 2002, 21). While before the 1940s 92% of the Estonian inhabitants were Estonians, then in the 1980s the percentage was only 62 (Kera 1998, 30). Knowing that there were only about one million native Estonians and compared to the number of immigrants it could be said that it is probably one of the most drastic examples of demographic changes. The people who immigrated to Estonia after the war represented the Soviet type of collectivism and due to their social position they had several privileges, whereas ethnicity did not play such an important role as their ideologically guaranteed position that had direct connection to their nationality. Thus, it was not necessary to melt in the Estonian society and learn the local language. Usually the immigrants from the Soviet Union lived as separate communities, which even more rendered it possible to cope with simply the Russian language and learning Estonian was neither needed nor attractive. Learning Estonian was rather seen as something undesirable.

After Estonia regained its independence, the situation had a drastic change for the immigrants. For a great number of aliens the social and political changes in the 1990s were strange and unpleasant, inducing uncertainty and being somewhat incomprehensible. Thousands of people found themselves not having the citizenship and they were suddenly in the need for applying for the permanent residence permit and the work permit or to initiate the naturalisation procedures in order to have legal stay in the country, although many of them had been born in Estonia or had lived here already for many decades (Lauristin & Heidmets 2002, 21). Certainly it was (and is) both socially and psychologically dramatic to them and it provoked protest and repulsion towards the native people, even if it was actually not justified.

Today the proportions have slightly changed. According to the data from the Statistical Office Estonia inhabited 1,347,510 people in 2005; 922,989 of them were Estonians and 424,521 were from other nationalities. Thus the percentage of Estonians is slightly bigger than in the 1980s, reaching 68% of the total, but it is not so much bigger that it would see the subconscious fear of Estonians of losing their nation and, even worse, their language as an ungrounded concern. The ruling part of the representatives of other nations or 26% is Russian. Also Ukrainians (2%), Byelorussians, and Finnish (1% of each) could separately be elicited, because the remaining 2% comprises the representatives of so many different nationalities that is carries no point to list them all. Since the Russians form more than a quarter of the whole population, it is no wonder that when talking about multicultural learning environment mainly such a situation is regarded, where in an Estonian school a certain number of mostly Russian speaking students study in an Estonian language class. Therefore, in the Estonian context it would be hard to talk about the multiculturality; we rather deal with a bi-cultural or bilingual learning environment.

Cultural diversities in the Estonian learning environment

Even today we have Estonian language schools and Russian language schools existing separately. In the latter the language of instruction is Russian. The Russian language schools offer different possibilities for having intensive classes in Estonian or the official language and the national curriculum is common to both school types, but many studies have shown that in case of Estonian language schools and Russian language schools we deal with a somewhat different learning environment. Many of the differences such as attitude towards teachers and towards the school in general, the teaching materials, pupils' temperament, etc are largely dependent on intercultural differences and thus their combination in either of the schools is a rather delicate issue.

The following table gives an overview of the number of Estonian and Russian schools. As an illustration it should be added that geographically the percentage of Russian schools is very different; for example, in Ida-Virumaa there are more Russian language schools than in the south of Estonia and there are more Russian schools in Tallinn than in smaller rural areas.

Table 1.

The number of Estonian and Russian language schools in Estonia (Heinlo 2003, 33).

	Language of instruction	Primary school	Basic school	Secondary School	Total
Number of schools	Estonian	75	206	155	436
	Est/Rus	1	6	15	22
	Russian	2	8	53	63

Total		78	220	243	521

The same differences caused by intercultural differences, which can be seen in Estonian language and Russian language schools are also clearly manifested in Russian pupils in Estonian schools, and their number is not very small. The study conducted in 2005 showed that 26% of the teachers had at least 1-3 Russian-speaking pupils in their class. 40% of the teachers claimed to have 4-6, and 34% even more than 7 Russian-speaking pupils (viide uuringule). If on average there were 25 pupils in a class then in some classes up to one third of the pupils is Russian, which makes the situation even more complicated for the teacher, because in that case the Russian pupils tend to communicate in Russian with their peers of the same nationality, but the teachers of the younger generation may not speak the language.

As already mentioned the learning environments in Russian and Estonian schools are unavoidably somewhat different and thus the pupils are also different in a way (see cultural dimensions below), and neither of them needs to have closer mutual contacts. Starting to learn in the Tallinn University to become a teacher, the young people from the two groups are suddenly seen as equal. In addition to being equal they are both prepared to teach either in an Estonian language or in a Russian language school, notwithstanding their different school experience. This led to the need to study, whether and how do students of different nationalities feel the cultural differences in the process of learning to become a teacher; if and how could the perception of intercultural differences or similarities be altered, and if and how the different origin and the previous school experience of the students should be taken into account in training new teachers.

The way a person perceives the world and himself in it, the attitude he has towards differences and particularities, how he can and is able to see things from different angles and hence consequently also whether and to what extent the future teacher is ready to perceive and tolerates pupils' cultural differences is largely dependent on the person's identity, its strength, confidence, and wholeness. A person with a positive self-concept and a developed identity is self-confident and he is able to have a calm and level-headed attitude towards any differences, without feeling that other cultures endanger him or his identity (Au & Blake 2003; Talib 2001, 39–50).

Thus, an important aspect in training future teachers of multicultural classes is shaping (or rather influencing) and strengthening as well as raising their awareness in their identity – also their cultural identity. The firmer and more stable the identity of a person is, the more positive is his attitude towards different cultures and nationalities.

Me and others

Childhood and education play an essential role in shaping citizens with strong and positive identity (Leino, Veisson etc. 2006, 2–3). Thus teachers play a key role in shaping the identity of the society as a whole, which proves that special attention needs to be paid to securing and strengthening teachers' identity. This need is supported by the fact that, similarly to some other notions, also the notion of identity was apparently rather unsafe in Estonia at the Soviet era, because for example in the Estonian Encyclopaedia, published in 1988, there is no such entry as "identity"

(Leino, Veisson etc. 2006, 3). Hence, until that time Estonians had a strong, yet a slightly disguised identity, due to which some people may still need their self-reliance to be supported. This may also be a reason why Estonians even now are afraid of losing their national identity and their language again and why in Estonia there is still a rather strong confrontation between Estonians and Russian speaking population, but at the same time Estonians are very tolerant towards other nations and cultures.

Individuality and collectivity can be distinguished in identity. Individuality is related to the personality of an individual and collectivity comprises social organisations such as family, and community, where the individual has grown up. The essence of identity may be given, obtained, or adopted. The content of the given identity cannot be selected: the physical nature determines whether a person is a man or a woman, black or white, etc. The obtained identity can be viewed as the result of the person's own effort. For example an immigrated young person may due to his intelligence and brightness be able to obtain good education and have a sound job regardless of his origin or the obstacles set by the society. The adopted identity makes it possible to improve and change the life and life-style, as well as the attitude and value judgements in the desired direction (All different, all equal 1995). Therefore guiding future teachers towards becoming aware of and analysing (for example through the questionnaire described below) their activity and attitudes is one possibility to influence the obtaining and adopting their professional and cultural identity, stressing one more time that a person, who has strong feelings about himself as the member of his culture and nation and who values his culture and the uniqueness of his nationality also understands the need for certainty of the members of other cultures and their right to hold their cultural traditions in high esteem. This leads to the understanding that intercultural differences are values, which enrich and diversify the living and learning environments (Banks, Cookson et al 2001, 5).

My cultures and other cultures

The idea of *culture* has been discussed by many theoreticians (Martinelli & Taylor 2000, 22–24; Pajupuu 2000). All of them share a common viewpoint: they see culture as something that is generated by people themselves. Culture is treated as "software" that people use in their everyday life: these are the basic preconditions, values, and norms shared by a certain group of people, which they carry with them (Martinelly & Taylor 2000, 18).

One of the most frequently used descriptions of culture is that on an iceberg. The idea is that culture can be described as an iceberg: only a small part of it can be seen, the rest is under the water. In the cultural context it means that if only a part of the elements of a culture are visible (art, literature, national clothes, music, etc), then the bigger part of the cultural elements are not very easy to distinguish (ideals; value judgements; attitudes towards authorities, childhood, work, etc; the role of age, gender, class, position, etc in human relations, and many other things (samas)).

Pajupuu (2000) refers to one of the most noted researchers of culture a Dutch scientist Geert Hofstede, whose ideas are based on probably the most large-scale study that has ever been conducted on cultures. He discovered that there are four important cultural dimensions, which can be used to describe different cultures in the world. These are mostly connected with communicational behaviour (Pajupuu 2000). The cultural

dimensions are: a) individualism-collectivism; b) distance of power; c) sustaining uncertainty; d) masculinity-femininity (manliness-womanliness). After further studies Hofstede added also time and space as important cultural indicators.

Edward T. and Mildred R. Hall developed their cultural model based on highly practical considerations: they wanted to give good advice to American businessmen, who travelled around the world on business. Their model was therefore based on behavioural components inherent to culture and their dimensions were also related to communication, space, or time. These were: slow or fast messages, slow or fast context, territoriality, personal space, and monochronic or polychronic time (Martinelli & Taylor 2000, 22–23). As it can be seen the Hall dimensions can basically be placed into Hofstede's dimensions, but they give an additional nuance.

Being aware of the previously described cultural theories aids future teachers to understand also Estonian and Russian culture and therefore also the differences between Estonian speaking and Russian speaking pupils and these render it possible to reason the differences in the learning environments in Estonian language and Russian language schools.

Based on the cultural dimensions by Hofstede (1993, 61–152) it can be claimed that Estonian and Russian cultures are on quite different poles, which provides an illustrative reason for the fact that Estonians and Russians do not sometimes understand each other and explains why Estonian and Russian learning environments are different in many respects.

Estonia, for example, has a culture with small power distance and it can be characterised by the following features: inequality among people needs to be minimised, parents treat their children as equal partners (and the other way around), teachers expect their pupils to show initiative and to express their opinions and pupils do not accept teachers behaving in an authoritarian way, but rather tend to see teachers as equal partners.

Russian culture has a large power distance. Therefore, for example, the relations between teachers and pupils at school are somewhat different: pupils expect the teacher to be the initiator; pupils' own initiative is not encouraged; pupils hold their teachers in great respect and regard their authoritarian behaviour natural. In family relations the prevailing principle purports that children obey to their parents and parents in turn obey the instructions of their boss at work.

Another significant example would be belonging among collectivist or individualist cultures. Estonia is the representative of the latter, which is characterised by the following indicators related to family, school, and work: self-identity is regarded very important, which means that children learn to think from the "I" point of view; the aim of going to school is to learn how to learn; characteristics such as honesty and sincerity are valued in relations and communications; good education guarantees better economic situation and well-being, and promotion at work is dependent on skills.

Russian culture can be characterised by the features of collectivist cultures. The stress is on "our-identity", which means that children are taught to think from the "we" point of view; there is a strong sense of collectivism and the collective's opinion carries a lot of strength. The main aim of school is to learn to do something and diploma is needed for getting into the circle of a certain group of people. An

employee's connections and relations play an important role in promotion at work rather than his skills and knowledge.

There are plenty of other examples as well, but the previous descriptions already serve as sufficient illustration.

Thus, teacher trainers face a challenge: how to invite students with diverse backgrounds to learn to become teachers and how to prepare these young people for their profession so that they would became efficient teachers, who can successfully cope with teaching pupils with different backgrounds in both Estonian language and Russian language schools. There are two ways of achieving it: different cultural background of the teacher training students should more be accounted for and they should be guided to understand and perceive their pupils' cultural differences rather positive than negative (Au & Blake, 2003: Johansson, 2007).

First of all it should be studied how future teachers perceive pupils' cultural differences based on their own school experience and whether it would be possible to make positive changes in the perception through improving teacher training. The latter could be achieved through imitating the pertinent situations, a good example of which is "The teacher's empathy card" (the idea and pictures from SEAL PROGRAMM), and by applying feedback interviews and interviews supporting the formation of professional attitudes (Timoštšuk and Normak, 2008).

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