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Cultural Diversity in Russian School: Results of Research of Elementary School Teachers' Experience with the Immigrant Children

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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the results of a multiphase research of the teachers' cultural attitudes and experience in a multicultural class in Russia. The goal of this article is to describe the teaching methods used by elementary class teachers in working with immigrant children, their stances towards immigrant children and their families. The collection of empirical material was done through questionnaires and interviews. 82 teachers of elementary classes have participated in the study. The results show that teachers mostly rely on individual work for the linguistic and academic support of the immigrant children and actively use ethnocultural technologies, group and interactive methods of work. This study have proven the need for the active inclusion of multicultural-oriented disciplines into teacher's training system, the most important of which is the method of teaching Russian as a foreign language. The study have also shown that majority of teachers has a positive opinion of the immigrant children; meanwhile, their stance towards their parents and different ethnicities may be mixed. In majority of cases, positive opinion leads to high expectations regarding the academic performance of the immigrant children.

Keywords: immigrant children, multicultural competences, elementary class teacher, teaching and discipline methods, attitudes.

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Introduction.

For every educational organization, an encounter with students who were raised in different social and cultural environments and lacking Russian language skills causes certain difficulties. However, it's the educational institutions who take the lead in the psychological-pedagogical, sociocultural and linguistic adaptation of the immigrant children (Zheleznyakova, 2012). The scarce Russian papers on the subject point out (Alexandrov, et al., 2012; Zborovsky & Shuklina, 2013) that there's still no institutionalized practice of inclusion and adaptation of the immigrant children into the educational space.

Modern ideas of support and protection of the immigrant children's personality are reflected in the works of many Russian and Western scientists. The conceptualization of the immigrant children's adaptation problems in the pedagogical sphere occurs in the framework of multicultural education (Banks, 2004; Berry, 1997), culturally responsive pedagogy (Grant & Tate, 1995), dialogue of cultures (Bibler, 1989), formative concepts of international dialogue culture (Gasnov, 1996), immigration pedagogy (Bondarevskaya & Gukalenko, 2000).

As Grant and Tate (1995) point out, the intensive day-to-day interaction between the students and teachers in school opens a lot of opportunities for mutual contacts and acquaintances; it indicates the high status of the teachers in the lives of their students. Therefore, the teacher can be seen as one of the most important figures for those arrived into a new society. The researchers say that it's very important to concentrate on the teacher to understand how schools treat cultural diversity.

Teaching in a multicultural class requires the teacher to have the multicultural competences (Dzhalalova, 2009). Teacher's multicultural competence allows to guarantee the academic success for all children, suggests practical and theoretical approaches that recognize the culture's role in certain educational conditions in class, prevents formation of minority stereotypes among the students and helps to solve the cultural conflicts in school (Trueba, 1988). According to Gorsky (2009), the teacher with the multicultural competences must be familiar with knowledge and methods in order to realize the multicultural program for the students with different needs. Despite the importance of the question about how pedagogues teach the immigrant children and what techniques they use for it, there's very few studies on the subject (Alismail, 2016). Banks et. al (2001) suggest that teachers in different societies should understand, accept and respect complex traits of ethnic groups in order to satisfy the educational and cultural needs of the students. Therefore, educational strategies, their attitudes and beliefs are important conditions for the "transformation of the teacher's required competences for the implementation of the necessary education in a culturally diverse environment" (Harrington & Hathaway, 1995).

Purpose of study

The need for this study has emerged due to the lack of papers about Russian teachers' work experience in a multicultural class. Meanwhile, there is a need for the descriptive research that improves the understanding of how teachers solve the immigrant children's acculturation problem (Sinkkonen, and Kyttälä, 2014; Alismail 2016). Therefore, the goal of this research was to find out how teachers work with the immigrant children and what attitudes are driving them.

Method and participants

During the first step of the study we have used the quantitative methodology. In order to identify the methods used in the work with immigrant children, we have used the quiz-questionnaire during the first part and an interview during the second. 63 elementary class teachers have taken part in the poll; the sample was random since majority of them were attending the refresher courses. We researched them in Kazan, Bugulma and Moscow. The sample pool included the teachers working in urban and rural schools.

Among the poll participants, 14 teachers had no experience of working with immigrant children, but they wanted to take part in the study. There were also 4 questionnaires that didn't contain any data about preferred work methods; we didn't analyze them.

Therefore, the answers of 40 pedagogues with experience of working with immigrant children were selected for the content analysis. A pedagogical technologies teacher has served as a coding expert.

20 elementary class teachers between the ages of 26 and 56 with the experience of school work and interaction with immigrant children have taken part in the interview. We have conducted a semi-structured individual interview with every participant. During the free form interview, teachers have told us about their experience of working with immigrant children: how many of them do they have, what problems do they have and how do they work with them. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for the analysis. The interviews spanned from 20 to 90 minutes in schools where the respondents work and on the refresher courses. We hosted the conversation in a free form without using a list of questions in order to get all participating sides fully involved and feel comfortable. However, the order has changed during the interviews, and some questions and hints were added or removed when it was necessary. Interviews were reprinted during the next 24 hours to retain the impressions and nuances of the discussion. All data was viewed and then manually encoded according to the qualitative research method (Busygina, 2003).

Findings

The quiz results have shown that the "ethnocultural methods" category was the most frequent. This category in respondents' answers can be found through such quotes as "learn the traditions of the child's country", "afterclass "Friendship of Nations" events", "hosting ethnic celebrations", "the child tells other students about his country", "tolerance lessons" etc.

The second most frequent category is "individualization of the learning". In their answers, teachers have mentioned the need for individual lessons, use of cards containing the step-by-step task completion algorithms, streamlined tasks for the children. However, some of the pedagogues mentioned only "help cards" in their quizzes without explaining what they meant. Answers like "additional explanation", "individual tasks" that show the use of the "learning individualization methods" can be also found in the pedagogues' answers.

Group and interactive (communicative) methods are encountered with the same frequency (24%). During the identification of the "interactive methods" we have encountered such terms as "trainings", "talks with the student", "talks about the child's subjects of interest", "discussions", "conversation mail with the teacher". The group methods were described by the respondents with such terms as "group work", "working in groups", "working in duos", "teaming up with a stronger student", "cooperative learning", and "cohesion trainings".

21% of the teachers suggest "additional Russian classes". Sometimes this category is formulated as "individual Russian lessons". Due to the use of the quiz method, certain data interpretation problems occur during the research. First of all, there's no possibility to clarify the answers. Second, there are difficulties with categorizing the answers because same options can be classified under different categories due to the lack of clarification. Third, during the quiz it's difficult to judge whether teachers really use these technologies or just claim to do so. Because of this, the qualitative method – an interview - was used from that point for the data clarification and the description of teachers' work experience.

The data analysis has been done through inductive and deductive ways. The deductive approach was based on the classification of practices suggested by Dumcius et al., (2012). They suggest dividing four categories of educational support for immigrant children: linguistic support, academic support,

parental inclusion and intercultural education/friendly learning space, however we decided against using the “parental inclusion” as a separate category. All others are the directions of teachers work with immigrant children and are related to the acculturation problems that they experience. The inclusion of parents in the educational process can be done for the linguistic and academic support – the different directions of teachers’ work. Through inductive approach we found out that these directions contain different work methods that teachers use (the inductive categories). The next table contains the frequency of phrases in the respondents’ answers about the directions of their work.

Teachers’ work directions (number of quotes)

Academic support	36
Creating a friendly atmosphere in class	69
Language support	75

The analysis of the interview material has shown that most of responses are related to the academic (“*While explaining the topic I used schemes, because the child remembers things better visually. He won’t understand everything orally, if, let’s say, it’s related to math. At the moment he didn’t knew the multiplication table. Or operations with numbers, all kids understand numbers, they’re the same in all languages. So I used schemes*”) and linguistic (“*But while the tutor is doing the Russian language, mostly trying to see the gaps, they work on it. Reading the tasks, trying to understand what the student didn’t get.*”) support of the immigrant children. In this study it was possible to clearly categorize the practices used by pedagogues: (“*When children got older, in 3rd-4th grade I started attaching tutors from those who performed well. And the immigrant children who studied better also became tutors, they helped too.*”) and the ones recommended by them: (“*No need to give them additional tasks.*”) On the issue of linguistic support, there are common opinions that indicate that the teacher knows what to do but doesn’t have the necessary skills (“*What methods should be used? What should be done to achieve this? Maybe we’re missing something because we work individually? Of course, we’d want to have some developed method for working with these children. Maybe some kind of tests...*”). The lack of specialized Russian language courses for the newcomer immigrant children, of course, makes the pedagogue’s work more difficult: (“*More focus on the Russian language. They won’t learn the material without knowing Russian. Of course, we have a section, but it’s open for all. We need a special one for these children.*”). Very few schools have organized such work practice: (“*No, they’re the same Russian language teachers but they’re ethnic Tatars and know Tatar well. And it’s simpler for them to communicate with these students because they speak mostly Turkic languages. So, teaching Russian through Tatar.*”) It is found that teachers are mostly forced to use the individual work in order to provide the linguistic and the academic support for the immigrant children (“*We stayed after the class. I explained what she didn’t understand in words and signs. During the afterhours we repeated everything that we mentioned during the lessons, in all subjects. Writing dictations, keywords, small essays.*”) Some teachers work with the students during the holidays, in afterhour groups, additionally explain the material in class (“*When I don’t have a preschool camp, I invite them during summer and winter vacations, 2-3 hours.*”) Many of them include working with the parents: (“*And then I gave advice to the parents on how to work with children at home. I called them every day and explained everything. What we do at lessons, what we do after classes and what should be improved at home.*”) use the other children of immigrants to help those who struggle with the language (“*The kids who more or less understand Russian are trying to translate. They explain through signs, pictures, simpler words.*”) A rather common practice is hosting the events with an ethnocultural component, including the cultural traditions of

the immigrant child's country: *"I held an annual festival, "Me, you, he and she – a friendly family together". We prepared for a year, then I invited a Tajik boy – he told a poem, and a Tajik girl – she danced, in a long dress. There was an Uzbek girl and a boy who did an Azerbaijani dance. There were dishes of every ethnicity. A Georgian girl performed a Georgian dance, it was very melodic. We brought out the food and let everyone try"*. In general, teachers talk about the importance of creating the friendly atmosphere in class for the adaptation of the immigrant students and communication with classmates, establishing personal relations: *"We explain that these children should be helped, so other kids would help them, be friends, talk."* Meanwhile, the interview process has identified the teachers' cultural beliefs, which can be positive or negative.

At the same time, many teachers' quotes have shown their opinion of immigrants. According to the previous studies, teachers' attitudes towards cultural diversity in class can be classified by groups: opinion of children, parents and ethnic groups. In addition to this, inductively we have found out teachers' opinions of all the aforementioned groups have their own specialties that are expressed through certain characteristics found in respondents' answers.

Let's analyze teachers' comments that show their opinion of immigrant students. In majority of cases, they comment on parents' language barrier: *"Illiterate. I see this in notes that they send to me. They can't write a simple text message on the phone."* In many interviews, teachers have separated their opinion on mothers and fathers: *"The mother doesn't understand anything in Russian. The kid comes home – no help. The father is at work all the time. But dad often visited the school after work, he was interested."* We have also recorded teachers' attitudes when they mentioned parents' desire and ability to help their children with studying (*"The parents are reasonable, they listen to teacher's advice. If teacher says that additional tasks are required to remember the materials, they agree"*); relations with teachers (*"The parents are polite. They have different traditions, different opinion of the teacher"*), their commitment to their children's education (*"Back in the day they used to say that if their children know how to count money, it's enough. Knows how to read a bit – don't need anything more. Now they're more serious. They're worried."*); personal qualities (*"Their parents are different from ours. They demand special attention for their children. If something goes wrong, they're annoyed"*), family relations (*"Usually they have complete families. Fathers are working; mothers stay at home with the children"*), national specifics, following traditions and celebrations (*"What national specifics do they have – holidays. They have their own celebrations and during these days kids don't go to school"*), their level of culture and education (*"Well, you ask the parents how much education they have. Most of them have completed 4 grades. For them it's difficult to help the children. How will they teach them Russian and math?"*), social and financial status (*"We all know that our children aren't very well-off financially. Most of our families have a lot of kids, from 3 to 6 each. And many of them are poor, children of the labor migrants. That's sad."*).

Analyzing the teachers' opinions of different ethnic groups, we have seen that in most cases they express them using the following characteristics: personal traits (*"No, the desire to study doesn't disappear. Especially Vietnamese, Koreans. Very hard working people, they want to study."*), language skills (*"If we talk about Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, the kids are mostly pretty good at Russian. Especially those who attended the kindergarten"*), national specifics (*"Tajiks are very persistent; their culture stands out, different language and religion"*), level of culture and education (*"Maybe in families of labor migrants from Asia there's no desire for knowledge, when parents studied, they didn't have a goal of getting a degree. Maybe that's why the kids think like that: I'll be studying like that and will be working"*).

with the dad on the market. Maybe the girls think that they'll have families and will stay with the kids.”), intercultural relations (“I mean almost all immigrants. They're sometimes suspicious of us.”)

We've found out that teachers' opinions of immigrants have different degrees of emotional depth. Teachers are mostly of positive opinion about the immigrant children. We have recorded 60 positive and 19 negative comments. In 11 quotes we couldn't clearly define a degree of emotion in opinion about students, so we considered them mixed/ambivalent.

We've discovered that in their quotes teachers often praise immigrants' efficiency and diligence. They highlight that these students are very motivated towards learning. Despite the fact that they have difficulties with Russian language, they strive to not fall behind the rest of the class. They're more interested in education than the local students: *“Immigrant children have a higher efficiency; compared to our students they have a bigger desire to learn”*. The children are friendly; they don't start conflicts in class. They're active and participate in all school events. Teachers especially point out that those children are very disciplined, honor their parents and respect their teachers: *“Children of immigrants are better-behaved, more disciplined. They know what for what they came to school. They respect their elders. They have a different worldview.”*

However, certain teachers have expressed negative opinions of immigrant children. They mentioned that they create a lot of problems for teachers because they don't know the Russian language and don't understand the course material: *“In class, of course, these kids are difficult to deal with”*. The teachers have said that difficulties in studying also influence children's behavior in class – they get angry and shut-in. Sometimes they can be aggressive towards other students: *“If they don't succeed at something, they get angry. They start fighting, showing signs of aggression”*. In some cases, teachers mention girl's low motivation towards education because of women's social passiveness in the immigrant families: *“The girl is very capable, but very lazy, she didn't study. That's what they're used to. They just want to marry and have kids”*. Teachers often link the immigrant students' problems in studying and behavior with their mentality. In some teachers' quotes, a negative opinion of their students' cultural differences can be seen: *“If they don't love you right from the start, they'll stay silent. They're still wild.”*

As has been mentioned before, many studies have researched the link between the attitudes and teachers' expectations, which can serve as their predictors of academic performance. It should be noted that we couldn't find expectations in every interview. At the same time, from 28 selected phrases 11 were encoded as low expectations and 17 as high. Often we've seen that negative attitudes towards immigrant students are related to low teacher expectations. In particular, they have negative opinions of the students' personal traits, their academic potential; accuse parents of not wanting to help their children. Teachers also believe that newly arrived children shouldn't get special treatment and that the requirements in class should be the same for everyone: *“I don't know how they dealt with that. The parents didn't help their children at all. I demanded that they write a dictation in Russian twice a week; that they've read Russian books at home, read and write in textbooks. I had the same tasks for all the students. The parents of these kids in particular didn't control anything”*. Also, condescending treatment, wish to give easier tasks or just apathy towards children are also an evidence of teacher's low expectations: *“We treated it condescendingly. Well, what could you do if they can't pull it off? Can't kick them out, they're children”*; *“Gifted by nature to do*

great, and if not, well, then not". We have also noted that the positive attitudes are related to teachers' orientation towards tolerance and creation of conditions for the successful adaptation of these children: "Children should feel comfortable; there should be a friendly space for them so they don't just sit and shake. Teacher should work with them and explain everything. Children should be happy to go to school and get good education."; "Pointless to scold them. We praise them, tell them that they try. Even small steps forward are good."

We have also found that majority of pedagogues links the students successes or problems to their parents' position. Compared to children, we have found less teachers' attitudes towards the parents of the students (52 quotes – 16 positive, 24 negative, 12 ambivalent/neutral.)

In the interviews teachers point out that there's motivation towards learning in many immigrant families. Parents, even with the low level of education, want their kids to succeed so they could work in Russia: *"These parents have more desire. They understand that their children have more opportunities to get education in our school and then live and work here."* Teachers note that parents respect teachers and listen to their advice – they especially praise the fathers, whom they believe are more interested in their children's education: *"Dads mostly know the language. They come to the meetings and listen. They're more responsible."* Teachers also say that immigrant families are very tight – they have their own national diasporas; they know and support each other well: *"It's good that they're friends on family level. Many of them know each other. They have diasporas, they support each other. Parents tend to unite, so they don't feel distant from the others."*

However, in many interviews teachers complain that parents can't help their children in studying; their main problem is lack of Russian knowledge. Especially often they blame the mothers: *"Their moms can't learn."* Teachers believe that they're concerned only with the material well-being of the kids, because immigrant families have a lot of children. The families are poor and only few of them can allow additional classes: *"They don't take their kids anywhere after school, no development. That requires time and money. Dads have the bazaar until 5 o'clock. Moms are cooking all day."* Teachers say that parents are usually very poorly educated; some of them didn't even graduate elementary school - their main occupation is commerce and parents believe that they should train their children for it. Children from some families don't attend school at all – girls stay at home and help their mothers in housekeeping, boys work with their fathers in the market: *"For example, my student is accompanied by his sister. She's two years older than him (12 years). Says that she's not attending school anywhere, will leave soon. Parents are here temporarily. She stays at home even if she's of school age. Her parents didn't enroll her anywhere – how could this be happening in our times?!"* Teachers believe that a lot of difficulties in educating the immigrant children are caused by the parents often moving for better jobs, so they're forced to drop the studies in the middle of the year and start anew: *"The parents' business didn't took off and they left in late December. It happens; they take the kids and leave when you just think they started getting into the learning process. You spend your energy on them. Sometimes they totally forget the Russian language. All of this on our shoulders, of course..."*

Besides that, during the interview analysis we've seen that teachers have varying opinions of different ethnicities. We have mostly witnessed the ambivalence in teachers' emotional ratings of different ethnic groups. Respondents believe that all migrants are different and often it depends on their country of origin – if it's economically developed, the immigrants have a higher level of culture and education. At the

same time, teachers complain that our country is mostly getting migrants with low social and material status. Teachers, as we've said above, mention a number of problems in teaching and adapting the newcomers, and of course, it influences teachers' negative or positive opinions of migrants of different nationalities. To be fair, we should point out that majority of teachers believes that there's no place for suspicion and ethnic conflict in school. Pedagogues believe that there should be an atmosphere of friendship and understanding in class: *"The relations in class are friendly. I support tolerance and teach it to the kids, explaining how hard it is for the immigrant folks"*.

Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of the teachers' work experience has shown that the individual work is mostly used for the purposes of linguistic and academic support (Ferlis & Xu, 2016). Usually, during the additional classes teachers once again explain the lesson material and work on texts without using the special method of teaching the Russian as a foreign language, despite the fact that such methods are developed in Russian and international practice (Zheleznyakova, 2011; Herrell & Jordan, 2016). During the additional classes teachers usually explain the material one more time or work with the texts: reading, retelling, composing dialogues without using special methods for teaching Russian as a foreign language, despite the fact that there are special methodics for teaching Russian as a secondary language. Teachers believe in necessity of the Russian language courses, but only few are informed about methods of teaching Russian as a foreign language. Some teachers say that they need to know the teaching methods, special books, guidelines for teaching the immigrant children. This is a challenge for the teacher preparation centers in an increasingly diverse world.

An individual approach towards a child can be seen in grades and easier tasks for the immigrant children. Teachers try to support the smallest successes of the children, giving more accessible tasks considering the child's abilities. On one hand, some researchers consider such practice as low expectations, which leads to worse student performance (Brown & Medway, 2007; Diamond et al., 2004; Brophy, 2000), but on the other hand, immigrant children can't do difficult work just because of poor language skills.

Traditionally, in Russian schools teachers hold ethnocultural events or talks with students in order to form the respectful attitudes towards different ethnicities, culture of international communication, others' traditions and social cohesion among these groups. The significance of learning about cultures of other ethnicities is highlighted by many researchers; all children gain an advantage during the introduction to other cultures (Banks, 2004; Belyankova, 2014; Ilinskaya, 2008; Richards & Brown & Forde, 2007).

Our interview was aimed at identifying the experience of working with the immigrant children, but during the process of analysis of the empirical materials the teachers' attitudes towards cultural diversity were also identified. Bryan & Atwater (2001) separate three categories of teachers' views towards cultural diversity: a) student characteristics – race, ethnicity, language, class; b) teachers' opinions regarding their parents and family; c) teachers' respective answers to diversity. In this study, we have attempted to expand and systemize the main types of characteristics in which teachers' opinions of immigrant children are found. We have discovered that attitudes towards children should be viewed through the following characteristics: personal qualities, gender, teacher-student relations, and interpersonal relations in class, academic performance, language skills, and national characteristics.

The ethnic views that are formed by ethnocultural contacts can be positive or negative, they can strengthen the emotional attitude towards one's own ethnic identity as well towards other ethnicities (Andreeva, 2001). In our research, we have clearly found that teachers react to children most positively.

Also, the analysis has shown that emotional level of attitudes defines the teachers' academic prognosis of immigrant children's performance. We have pointed out that in many cases positive attitudes lead to high expectations and vice versa, negative attitudes lead to low expectations – Gay (2002) and Hachfeld et al. (2010). have come to similar conclusions in their works.

Teachers' opinion of parents and ethnic groups is both ambivalent and negative. Speaking of this, we should mention the results of our previous research, where we have identified the teachers' social distance towards different ethnic groups in the context of society (Khairutdinova, 2019). The use of different attitude calculation methods in the research prevents us from making clear conclusions. At the same time, we can note a certain trend: teachers have a more positive opinion of cultural diversity in society than in their own class – Horenczyk & Tatar (2001) have come to the same conclusion in their research.

Future implications

In context of multicultural education, attitudes and beliefs of teachers can be formed and reflect in their teaching activity, and therefore, influence the studying opportunities of children with cultural differences (Milner, 2010). Using these ideas, further research will be directed at the identification of links between the teacher's educational practices and his cultural attitudes in working with immigrant children.

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