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## **THE CULTURAL IDENTITY IN SCHOOL AGE**

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The contemporary World of globalization unites people of various ethnic and cultural communities around common ideas, principles, norms, rights and obligations and it thus demands the development of a deeper insight into the very nature and substance of the ethnic and cultural identity of the separate groups of people, inhabiting this unifying area. People face a major problem – how to fit in this society without losing their specifics, i.e, without being blurred away to lose the unique values, preserved as a heritage from their ancestors in the course of centuries of national traditions.

The problem is still more acute as far as younger people are concerned in that they are already growing up in multi-national and widely varying cultural communities and can thus lose the connections to the union and the self-identification of their source with a greater ease. Unification is a phenomenon which is most clearly pronounced among the younger generation and indeed, younger people from all European countries, the Americas and even from the Far East demand to look alike, to listen to the same music and to unite around a uniform system of values. Inspiration comes from various sources - pop and rock idols, movie stars and fashion leaders to name a few.

And so one of the major tasks, which all factors effecting education and upbringing are facing today, may be formulated as an effort to find the shortest road to the formation of a self identity accepted by the younger generation and how to make it stay in the understandings of life and the adopted system of values in the minds of every young person. It may here be said, that one efficient solution is the process of uniting and consolidation around a given cultural identity, which includes an array of elements, like knowledge, emotions, traditions, behavioral patterns, etc., in effect making a specific group of people differ from all others within the globally unifying and multi-national environment.

Such an approach should become the core objective of an educational process adopted by all related institutions and should be carried out with all available means – both in education and upbringing – during the in and out of class activities of the children; its should be a major objective not only for the school, but for all other institutions of education, charity, culture, etc. A joint effort and a joint effect should be searched for and the major task should be to create an overall educational environment,

in which our children will adopt an outlook, will feel and create a system of values thus looking for the most efficient means for the formation of their personal identities.

The most sensitive period in the life and the development of the younger people are their school days and several phases may clearly be outlined during this period as well as the stages in the formation of their cultural identity and the genesis of these processes.

One example may be the classification by age groups. There is a considerable difference in the identity awareness between pre-school and early school-age children. During this period in their life, they are most dependants on the immediate domestic and spiritual environment, in which they grow and learn. Differences are readily observable – when the family is united, their members have the same ethnos, bearing in itself the typical cultural markers and signs. If the domestic environment, however, is of mixed character – that is, the parents come from different ethnic groups and belong to varying cultural communities - they transfer their views, spiritual, cultural and historic values to their children. Such factors intermix with the background of the other parent and, respectively, with his/her family and this may often lead to conflicts, expressed in the ambiguity of choice – which ritual, tradition, habit to follow when, for example, time comes to baptize the child or to mark other important moments in its life connected to education, age group transition, etc.

A major problem, and a source of considerable confusion, is language. Children would usually pronounce their first words in an imitation of their mother, who is closest near by. This is why by tradition; our national language would be dubbed our “mother tongue”. This “tongue” carries in itself not only the linguistic features of human communication, expressed in its lexical, phonetic and expressively emotional features, but also the whole cultural tradition; the wealth of creativity of generations of people, using this “tongue”. At the same time, however, the other parent and his relatives would transmit the cultural background of their language and, respectively, ethnos. Children of such families, grow in a bi-linguistic environment and acquire mixed cultural attitudes, containing elements derived from two varying cultural pools of different weight – their presence depends on which of the two influences has been more powerful during the process of bringing the child up. During this stage, the basic cultural phenomenon, playing the role of an educational factor, is the *enculturation*. The upcoming young person understands the environment unconsciously – everything which is spoken and done – and considers it normal, natural and necessary. The youngster cannot differentiate

between events and does not have the ability to form a personal point of view and is deprived of the right to make a choice.

In parallel to growing up, and in particular upon coming of school age, the child finds itself in a completely different environment and the factor, playing the major role in the formation of its outlook is the school, the educational environment, the traditions of the concrete school and most of all the impressions from the first teachers and educators. The influences from the family are still very strong but it begins to gradually give way to the school, the schoolmates, the various educational traditions and approaches adopted there. Together with the process of learning, the young person gradually develops the ability to make *evaluations and assessments*, his/her own choices; to form a personal opinion and for a self-contained cultural identity. Of course the intensified contacts with other children, with children from neighboring classes give the individual an opportunity and an environment to learn and to get a chance to make a choice. The process runs with some fluctuations, with considerable doubts and even shocks. Often, the child may adopt a dubious behavioral pattern and a confused understanding of the World – one formed from the environment at home and one from outside. Initially, this is an unconscious process; an act of imitation, a circumstantial event, the force of a powerful educational influence or an overwhelming cultural phenomenon, which – however- gradually obtains clearly identifiable indicators.

During the next stage, the cultural identity acquires a clearly marked expression and this is a consequence from the intensification of the process of self-assessment and individualized manner of thought of the students in the primary and upper high-school grades. The books, which have been read, the studying of the various subjects and the expansion of the circle of contacts are growingly the external factors of a World, outside of the family circle, which together with the school grant the opportunity for expansion of the outlook on the World and the formation of the cultural preferences as well as the overall personality of the student. A most powerful source of influence at this point in time is the circle of friends or the so-called informal communication within groups of varying ages, differing views and diverse behavior. They are the vehicles of a different type of culture; sub-cultural communities the members of which is hard to control by parents, educators and society in general. But the relations, established during this period in life, its emotional aspects are often decisive for the formation of the major personality features of the growing child, student; of the young man and woman. Ever more often double-standards become a part of the behavior

of the younger people – with one manifestation in the environment of official institutions (at home and at school) and with a separate behavioral mode within the circle of friends, which takes not only most of the time but also the thoughts and the emotional power of the young person, member of this circle.

The cultural identity of a person is a matter of long-term formation and development throughout life – upon completion of the different educational stages, when selecting the next educational institution and specialty, when selecting the place to live or the country to study or work, etc. Each new domestic and social environment continues to exert its influence with all of its characteristic forces – as a mode of life, as relationship with the elders and with people of one's own age group; as behavioral norms, cultural traditions, etc. The process becomes particularly complex during studies abroad, where the young person is forced to acquire cultural norms and even the traditions of the new place and to fit in the overall picture of entirely new environment. This is particularly valid for university graduates when looking for a job and trying to settle in the foreign company. In his work and in relation to his/her traditions the individual is forced to relive himself of the habits, acquired at home during the days of childhood. At the same time however, projected on the background of the new environment the individual understands all the more vividly who he/she actually is and the cultural environment he/she belongs to or has originated from. In such cases the ethno-cultural identity either fades away as a result of the efforts of the young person to identify himself with the representatives of the new environment or to the contrary - it becomes even more expressed and not always due to the force of nostalgia. Ever more often, people find themselves searching for their roots and trying to understand them better; to a self-identification as a member of his people and a part of a nation as well as the cultural community which has created and educated him. In this respect a particular factor for the self awareness of the individual is the strive of the person, who has found himself in a different and new environment, to make a correct assessment and understand the positive, the beautiful, the powerful; something he or she can be proud of and improve his her self awareness and pride of being a representative, a carrier and successor to a line of cultural tradition, coming down from his ancestors.

In the process of being educated and brought up, even during his earliest days, the individual should be able to acquire – together with the idea of his own national identity – knowledge of other cultural communities, which have, in one or another way, made a contribution to the course of global history. One of the major reasons for the

contemporary hatred and loath between various ethnic communities were witnessing on a daily basis all over the World is rooted in the lack of upbringing and education in the direction of tolerance for others, in the understanding and acknowledgment of the “otherness” of people, who differ from us but – just like us – possess their own system of values and contributions, with which we should live in understanding. All these are norms, which remain no more than good wishes if, and when, they remain within the realm of the school, the educational institutions and their programs. One considerable problem, when speaking of tolerance, is the powerful influence of factors like religious fanaticism, religious intolerance, chauvinism which have all served to make people believe in their national uniqueness and superiority and educated in them a sense of disregard for all others – inferior nations to them – but also ignorance and a strive for blind copying, lack of one’s own critical thinking among great masses of people. Such states of mind, named by E. From “abandoning freedom” breed extremism and violence and they are the foundations of contemporary world-scale terrorism. Alas, it is only true for too many of our contemporaries, that to follow some leader – often a religious head and fanatic – and to execute his demands and dictate without reserve as well as his will, behavior and cultural model, is much easier and safer than to follow their own ideas and understandings.

Today, the most *urgent educational task* – without forgetting our past – may be defined as the striving to build our relationships with the World on the cultural axis of the mutual experience on the basis of our life today; in acknowledging that “otherness” and the cultural, ethnic and national differences and specifics of the various peoples who populate and will continue to expand the cultural environment of the European Union.

A new phenomenon seems to be emerging in the European environment - the so-called multiculturalism. This phenomenon gives the opportunity to each one of us to make a personal choice - of which cultural community may be he becomes a part. This is how the contemporary “*poly-cultural personality*” is formed, i.e. this is the person who is able to unite the elements of varying cultures to his own benefit and the formation of one’s own personal space. And it is also possible; that this person may choose cosmopolitanism and deny his origin and national belonging.

All upbringing and, later, educational efforts should be directed under a common goal: *to unite and get closer the representatives of the various ethnic groups on the solid ground of the all-human and national system of values.* At the same time the powerful forces behind the various national beliefs, which are a long tested factor of identification

in the conditions of foreign political and spiritual oppression - a role so well played by the east-orthodox Christianity during the struggle of our nation for religious and national independence.

Our task is to establish a modern, civil and humane society led by the cultural, religious and ethnic tolerance, respect for the traditions of “others” and the protection of the values of a civil society.

The role of the cultural and educational traditions in the achievement of these tasks should be identified on the background of:

- ❖ Global cultural achievements of the whole of humanity which are (or rather should be) part of the culture of contemporary man; knowledge of the most well known achievements and a better understanding of the Bulgarian cultural sources and their contribution to World culture;
- ❖ The contribution of the global civilizations and the position of Bulgaria amongst them;
- ❖ Past-present and future perspectives in the contest of our belonging to the common European home;
- ❖ Acquiring a clear view of the specifics of the European civilization – via knowledge, interwoven in the texture of the various school subjects and via out-of school initiatives in various clubs, internet forums etc.
- ❖ Defining and understanding of the role of religions as a cultural phenomenon and the major stone in the construction of the building, where the respective cultural identity is to be born;
- ❖ Organization of various initiatives – local and international – based on the competition or simple cultural and educational events where the cultural identities and their true and all-round characteristics may be manifested;
- ❖ Inter-cultural activities as means to understand one’s own cultural identity and the place it has among the others as well as its major role for the achievement of understanding between people, acknowledging their cultural specifics and their specific otherness;
- ❖ Studying the rights of children and incorporating the knowledge of these rights in the very core of the cultural identity of the contemporary young person and student;

- ❖ Education and upbringing should be directed at the understanding of the Bulgarian specifics and the place these features have in the creation of the personality and the cultural status of contemporary young people.

During the last several years we have become witnesses to the realization of a significant international program within the European cultural and educational environment, dedicated to the issue of cultural heritage. Not surprisingly, we have also seen the emergence of a special branch in the educational sciences, named Heritage pedagogy. In Bulgaria too, we have organized “European months of the cultural and national heritage”. The participants are invited to select from a number of activity forms and means with a major objective – to become a part of the European cultural environment and contribute our own cultural and ethnic identity, derived from a heritage, brought down from our ancestors so as to safe keep it for our next generations and use it to enrich the European and all-human cultural values.

The World we live in is constantly changing and this is all the more true of the educational environment in which are children and young people are brought up. The new poli-cultural situation is a fact to take careful consideration of and to use as means of self-identification. Self-identification has become a serious social and personal problem, which has become a major issue for a number of countries and nations. It is all the more important for people, who live within a given territory, populated by various ethnic groups, carrying widely varying cultural and ethnic models. The issue has been the cause of a number of problems, questions and doubts as well as confusion – which direction to take and how to self-identify as an individual, group of children, younger people and those students, who have chosen to study abroad.

Educational factors are also confronted with a much more difficult problem to solve – in the family, the groups of friends, in the proximity of alien and unknown forms of existence. Pedagogues are confronted with the problem of how to make all this fit into the daily educational routine and how to incorporate this novelty in the educational goals before the community in general and the separate individual? The common formula is something everyone seems to accept – we must educate people in the direction of the all-European values – although at this point it remains no more than a good wish. It has not been carried out successfully in the tasks and objectives as well as the overall approach to the educational content of a number of academically studied subjects and is far from being a matter of fact in the unclear objectives of ordinary

upbringing. Under such circumstances, decisions have to be taken by the individual himself and in many cases; they are far from being the best.

At the same time, the difference between the various identity types creates obstacles before communication, before unity, understanding and working for a common goal – on the background of the national. The varieties of ethnic identities, which are the major condition (basis) for the inter-cultural communication, also serve as a barrier before its realization. In spite of the established conditions, during multi-ethnic gatherings – congresses, celebrations, meetings, etc., - relations between the many participants are founded on the ethnic principle and indeed, every participant seems to look for contacts with someone of his own kind.

According to a number of studies, in the process of inter-cultural communication the cultural identity seems to be playing a dubious role. It permits the participants to create specific images of themselves, to foresee behavioral models thus making communication much easier. It's restrictive role, however, is manifested at the same time – a type of rationalization appears, i.e. restricting the communication sphere within the area of mutual understanding to divert any possibility of conflict.

The escape of a number of young people back to their own circle and the strive to look for support among their compatriots, among their own ethnic group is a phenomenon, which may be observed in all multi-national societies. The explanation is, that in acknowledging their belonging to the given ethnic group, people try to find a way out; to find a solution to their social helplessness; to feel a part of the community which might be able to ensure for them an orientation in the dynamic World of numerous value systems and protect them against the hardships of emigration.

And while the young people are trying hard to fit in the culture of their new habitat, they find that they already have their own children. It is at this point, that they once again awake to the reality of their original belonging and the returning to their roots is manifested in the way they address the upbringing of their children: in an atmosphere of national identity, which takes the course they have themselves lived through when they were young. Thus the circle closes - or rather expands - to cover new territories.

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