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# DEVELOPING YOUTH INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH NON-FORMAL EDUCATION PRACTICES

**Abstract.** The article is devoted to the problem of developing intercultural competence of youth (ICC) in the conditions of modern social transformations caused by war, mass population displacement and the need for integration into new social environments. Educational institutions today act not only as spaces for acquiring knowledge and forming skills, but also as centres of socialization and forming tolerance. The role of non-formal education for developing ICC is emphasised, because it creates the most favourable conditions for practical intercultural interaction, the formation of empathy, critical thinking and readiness for life in a multicultural society. The article also presents the results of testing educational practices within the international Erasmus+ project "UTOPIA: intercUltural Training to suppOrt disPlaced UkrainIAns", in particular the development of a manual for youth workers "Youth Workers' Guide for Intercultural Dialogue Facilitation" and a simulation game "Become Agent of Social Changes". The results of the project have shown the positive impact of such practices of non-formal education in the context of the formation and deepening of the ICC of youth, which is a key factor for their successful integration into the globalized world. The data obtained are of practical importance for educators, youth workers and educational policy makers, because, among other things, they demonstrate the potential of international partnerships and non-formal practices in building a culture of mutual respect and civic responsibility. The development of ICC through non-formal education practices should be considered as a strategically important direction that contributes to improving the quality of education, forming active global citizens, and strengthening the social cohesion of Ukrainian society.

**Key words:** intercultural competence (ICC), non-formal education, multicultural education, internally displaced person, international educational project, Erasmus+.

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# РОЗВИТОК МІЖКУЛЬТУРНОЇ КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТІ МОЛОДІ ЧЕРЕЗ ПРАКТИКИ НЕФОРМАЛЬНОЇ ОСВІТИ

**Анотація.** Статтю присвячено проблемі розвитку міжкультурної компетентності молоді (МКК) в умовах сучасних соціальних трансформацій, зумовлених війною, масовим переміщенням населення та потребою інтеграції в нові соціальні середовища. Заклади освіти нині виступають не лише просторами для здобуття знань та формування навичок, а й осередками соціалізації та формування толерантності. Акцент зроблено на ролі неформальної освіти в розвитку МКК, адже саме вона створює найбільш сприятливі умови для практичної міжкультурної взаємодії, формування емпатії, критичного мислення та готовності до життя в багатокультурному суспільстві. Також у статті представлено результати апробації освітніх практик у межах міжнародного проєкту Erasmus+ «UTOPIA: intercUltural Training to suppOrt disPlaced UkrainIAns», зокрема розроблення посібника для молодіжних працівників «Youth Workers' Guide for Intercultural Dialogue Facilitation» та гри-симуляції «Become Agent of Social Changes». Результати проєкту засвідчили позитивний вплив подібних практик неформальної освіти у контексті формування й поглиблення МКК молоді, що є ключовою умовою її успішної інтеграції в глобалізований світ. Отримані дані мають практичне значення для освітян, молодіжних працівни-

ків та розробників освітньої політики, адже, крім іншого, демонструють потенціал міжнародних партнерств і неформальних практик у розбудові культури взаємоповаги та громадянської відповідальності. Розвиток МКК через практики неформальної освіти варто розглядати як стратегічно важливий напрям, що сприяє підвищенню якості освіти, формуванню активних глобальних громадян та зміцненню соціальної згуртованості українського суспільства.

**Ключові слова:** міжкультурна компетентність, неформальна освіта, полікультурне виховання, вимушено переміщена особа, міжнародний освітній проєкт, Erasmus+.

**Introduction**. Modern transformation processes in Ukrainian society, caused by war, forced displacement of millions of citizens and the need for their integration into new social environments, pose complex challenges to the education system. General secondary and higher education institutions are becoming not only spaces for acquiring knowledge, but also centres of social support, adaptation and upbringing, where children and young people with different life experiences, values and cultural practices interact. It requires teachers to adopt new approaches to organizing the educational process.

In this context, an important task for educational institutions is the development of intercultural competencies (ICC) of pupils and students, which ensure the ability for dialogue, cooperation and mutual respect. Such development is a necessary condition not only for the effective socialization of internally displaced persons (IDPs), but also for the formation of a culture of tolerance, openness and civic responsibility in general.

**Analysis of research and publications**. A review of modern publications shows that scientists focus on studying the ICC from various aspects. Thus, the essence of the ICC has already been studied (N. Ramstrand, L. Weisova, E. Nylander, N. Ovcharenko, etc.), a review of empirical methods of ICC has been conducted (M. Sova, S. Denizhna), the level of formation of ICC of higher education students (I. Bakhov, O. Snigovska, N. Shemyakina, T. Shcherbyna, O. Zamora, Yu. Serpeninova, N. Vinnychenko, etc.) and formation of the ICC of educators (K. Dora, I. Solova, O. Ivashko, etc.) have been determined. It is noteworthy that scientists have already been investigating the role of virtual reality for improving ICC in educational environments that lack authentic and immersive experiences (R. Shadiev, X. Wang, S. Shen).

**The aim** of our study is to analyse the practices of non-formal education for developing ICC among young people and to present the results of testing ICC development strategies within the international Erasmus+ project "UTOPIA: intercUltural Training to suppOrt disPlaced UkrainIAns" (project code: 2023-2-RO01-KA220-YOU-000174611) [11].

**Statement of the main material**. ICC is becoming an increasingly important skill in the context of globalization and growing cultural diversity in education and professional activities. In scientific discourse, ICC is considered by researchers as a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes and awareness that allow for effective interaction in different cultural contexts, which can be developed due to a combination of immersion in a virtual environment and interactive learning strategies [12]; not just the ability to know about another culture or language, but the ability to communicate effectively and with awareness of one's own and other cultural contexts [7]; an educational and social value that needs to be rethought depending on the cultural and geopolitical context [9]; a multidimensional ability that develops in the process of learning, includes affective, cognitive and behavioural components, and is manifested in the ability to interact effectively with representatives of other cultures [10].

T. Shcherbyna et al. define ICC as an integral part of employment-oriented professional skills that are necessary in the modern globalized world [5]. In turn, D. Kochmar and Ya. Pocheniuk [3] consider ICC as an integrative characteristic of a person that ensures effective interaction with representatives of other cultures, understanding of their value dominants, traditions and social norms. For the development of ICC in the process of learning a foreign language, the authors offer a number of technologies: information and communication technologies (ICT), online platforms, gamification, trainings and role-playing games, academic mobility, etc.

In our study, we will understand the ICC as the ability of a young person to effectively and ethically interact with representatives of different cultures, combining knowledge, empathy, tolerance and practical skills of cooperation, which are formed primarily through non-formal education practices, since traditional educational practices are not always able to respond promptly to dynamic social changes. Therefore, in this context, non-formal education methods are becoming important, which allow for flexible combination of learning with socio-educational tasks. Their use in educational institutions creates conditions for the development of critical thinking, empathy and readiness of young people for life in a multicultural society.

The Law of Ukraine "On Education" defines formal education as an organized and standardized learning process carried out in educational institutions. It

ensures the acquisition of state-recognized qualifications and learning outcomes defined by educational standards. In the context of the ICC, formal education includes the study of foreign languages, specialized courses, the integration of intercultural topics into programs, and the use of project-based learning. The main result is the formation of a theoretical basis and academic understanding of cultural differences.

Non-formal education is defined as learning that is usually carried out within specially organized educational programs, but does not provide for the award of state-recognized qualifications at the level of education (although a person may get a certificate at the end of the course, for example). In the field of intercultural education, it includes participation in trainings, workshops, international internships, academic mobility, volunteer and youth exchanges (including the Fulbright Academic Exchange Program, Erasmus+, the Global UGRAD Program, the DAAD Scholarship, etc.). Such practices create conditions for direct intercultural interaction, the development of communication skills, critical thinking, tolerance and flexibility in the perception of cultural diversity. This form of learning is most relevant to the development of young people's ICC, as it provides practical experience in real or close to real situations.

Informal education is the self-organized acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities in everyday life through professional, public or volunteer activities, leisure, etc. Its key tools to form ICC are travelling, online courses, blogs, interaction in multicultural environments. The result is the development of personal flexibility, openness, adaptive skills and the ability to self-education [1].

In her study, T. Sharova analysed the overall impact of education (formal, non-formal and informal) on the formation of ICC as a person's ability to effectively interact with representatives of other cultures and build communication on the principles of tolerance, mutual respect and openness. We share the researcher's views on the role of educational institutions in this context, since the educational process contributes to the development of critical thinking about cultural stereotypes and prejudices. According to T. Sharova, the active involvement of students in practical activities is of great importance: participation in international exchanges, cooperation with foreign partners, volunteer projects contribute to a deeper understanding of cultural diversity and the development of empathy [4, p. 329–330].

T. Schmidt's research [6] demonstrates that the formation of ICC is relevant not only in civilian education, but also in the professional training of future military specialists. The author analyses the international experience of the USA, Great Britain and Canada, as well as Ukrainian practices, and identifies a set of pedagogical methods that effectively contribute to the development of ICC (they include case methods, simulation and role-playing games, intercultural trainings, discussions of cultural cases, debates, as well as the study of art, literature and media). A feature of the proposed approach is the complexity and integration of methods, which allows combining theoretical knowledge and practical skills of intercultural interaction. These conclusions echo modern strategies of non-formal education, where the emphasis is on practical experience is high, self-reflection and immersion in the cultural environment, which is key to the development of ICC of young people.

Thus, the development of ICC is not limited to the traditional educational process. Its effectiveness is ensured by the integrated use of formal, non-formal and informal education, but it is non-formal practices that create the most favourable conditions for the formation of young people's practical experience of intercultural interaction.

The formation of young people's ICC is a key factor for a successful socialization in a multicultural society. ICC is a multidimensional phenomenon that combines knowledge, values, skills and motivation necessary for effective interaction in a multicultural environment. Its structure includes four interrelated components:

1) cognitive, which provides knowledge about cultural differences, social norms and values and forms the basis for conscious communication and cooperation;

2) affective, which reflects an attitude towards cultural diversity based on tolerance, openness and empathy;

3) behavioural, which includes practical skills to adapt communication style, resolve conflicts and build effective interaction with representatives of other cultures;

4) motivational, which determines the readiness and desire to participate in intercultural dialogue, interest in joint initiatives and cooperation [4, p. 329-330], [7].

In this context, the concept of multicultural education is important as well, which reveals the socio-cultural aspect of personality development in a multicultural environment. Thus, in general, ICC and multicultural education have a common goal which is the development of the individual's ability to interact effectively in a multicultural environment. A. Kyrpa also identifies the components of multicultural education: cognitive, emotional-value and activity-behavioural. The cognitive aspect provides knowledge of cultural diversity, the emotional-value aspect forms a tolerant attitude and social sensitivity, and the activ-

ity-behavioural one includes practical skills of cooperation and overcoming conflicts in intercultural situations [2; 8].

Thus, the structure of ICC and multicultural education largely coincides: both approaches include knowledge of cultures, the formation of a positive attitude towards diversity and the development of practical interaction skills. The difference is that ICC emphasizes the motivational component and active participation in intercultural dialogue, while multicultural education focuses more on the educational aspect, sociocultural identification of the individual and the formation of the ability to creatively solve intercultural situations. Thus, multicultural education complements the concept of ICC, emphasizing systematicity, sociocultural identification and the formation of the ability to creatively solve intercultural situations. These approaches find their practical implementation in international educational projects.

Among the possible strategies for the development of ICC, T. Shcherbyna et al. distinguish the following: experimental learning, intercultural learning, integration into curricula, virtual programs for the exchange of experience, interdisciplinary cooperation [5]. For our part, we propose to expand this list and consider the following proposals for the development of the ICC of students:

1) project-based learning in multicultural teams (creating joint stimulates understanding of different approaches to problem solving and builds teamwork skills);

2) simulations and role-playing games (reproducing situations of intercultural interaction helps students practice communication, conflict management and decision-making in a safe environment);

3) interactive online platforms and digital resources (using blogs, forums, webinars and virtual laboratories for intercultural learning allows for practical experience regardless of geographical location);

4) cultural events and joint creative projects (organizing cultural festivals or exhibitions stimulates acquaintance with different values and traditions);

5) reflective practices (keeping diaries, group discussions, analysing one's own cultural stereotypes contributes to the conscious acquisition of intercultural knowledge and the formation of a tolerant attitude).

Thus, experimental forms of learning, participation in intercultural exchange programs and inclusive curricula that reflect cultural diversity contribute to students going beyond their comfort zone and developing the competence necessary for effective interaction in a multicultural environment. As some researchers note, the integration of ICC into educational practices contributes to the formation of future global citizens and emphasizes its strategic significance in the 21st century.

The practical application of these strategies was tested when working within the international project funded by Erasmus+ "UTOPIA: intercUltural Training to suppOrt disPlaced UkrainIAns". Its implementation provides valuable experience in integrating the described methods into work with both school and university youth.

The project was also implemented in the context of the research work of the Department of Social and Humanities on the topic: "Personality in the educational environment of modern society" (state registration number 0123U104510), involved public organizations and educational institutions from Romania (Asociatia Consultantilor in Dezvoltare Comunitara), Greece (KAINOTOMIA & SIA EE) and Poland (Stowarzyszeni E Centrum Wspierania Edukacji I Przedsiebiorcz Osci).

In the context of the project implementation, the partners jointly developed a manual on intercultural dialogue for youth workers, which contains theoretical information and practices of non-formal education for working with local youth and forcibly / internally displaced Ukrainians, "Youth Workers' Guide for Intercultural Dialogue Facilitation", and a simulation game "Become Agent of Social Changes", which reveals issues of integration, inclusion, and team interaction in an intercultural and/or multicultural environment. A face-to-face meeting of partners was held to exchange experience working with youth in formal and non-formal education.

The manual contains materials in the following sections: Art; Sports and games; Food and Culinary experiences; Heritage and Traditional Practices; Interfaith and Interreligious Dialogue; Technology and Digital Platforms; Storytelling and Literature; Media and Digital Literacy; Community Service and Volunteering; Environmental Sustainability. Each section consists of short theoretical units and good practices, which include forms and methods of working with youth, methodological advice how to involve young people from different cultural and social backgrounds. Thus, the manual serves as a practical tool for the development of youth's ICC, as it contributes to the formation of tolerance, empathy, openness to cultural diversity, and skills for effective interaction in a multicultural environment.

The decision-making simulation game "Become Agent of Social Changes" helps develop empathy and intercultural sensitivity through storylines about discrimination against forcibly displaced persons (in particular from Ukraine), based on real events. The game offers six interactive storylines, presented from the side of forcibly / internally displaced persons and

local residents who witnessed the case. Each choice changes the course of the story and leads to one of several possible endings. The game examines situations that can occur in an educational institution, in the workplace and in everyday life. This simulation game is a safe space for reflection, learning and development of a young person as an agent of social change.

All the developed materials were tested by youth workers, educators and education experts in Romania, Greece, Poland and Ukraine. It is worth emphasizing that the participation of Ukrainian educational institutions and NGOs demonstrates the importance of international partnership, innovative educational solutions and active involvement of teachers in intercultural learning practices, which contributes to the upbringing of a new generation of citizens ready for life in a globalized world.

At the end of the project, national events were held in the partner countries, which included not only the presentation of the developed materials, but also became a platform for discussing intercultural learning practices, challenges and opportunities for education in times of war, trauma-informed approaches in working with youth, practices for developing emotional intelligence, critical thinking, respect for diversity and other key competencies necessary for social transformations. As a result of national events, ideas for potential joint initiatives were developed to foster ICC among youth through non-formal educational practices, etc.

Thus, 20 youth workers and 20 youth representatives from four countries participated in the piloting of the materials of the manual. 85% of the piloting participants noted the relevance of the selected forms and methods of working with youth, which contribute to the formation of the ICC, understanding the integrity of the world picture and expanding the understanding of the life contexts of different countries. The results obtained showed that the materials not only meet the needs of modern youth, but also create a basis for dialogue between representatives of different cultures. It is important that the participants emphasized the practical value of good practices, since they can be integrated into educational, youth and public initiatives. This proves that the manual is an effective resource for developing tolerance, critical thinking and readiness to interact in a multicultural environment among young people.

10 youth workers and 30 youth representatives from four countries were involved in testing and evaluating the simulation game. 90% of respondents noted the realism of the proposed game scenarios and a wide range of reactions to a particular event. This indicates that the simulation reflects current social challenges

and provides an effective tool for reflection on one's own actions in similar situations. In addition, 95% of surveyed educators and youth workers expressed their willingness to use the game in their practice to develop youth's ICC. Thus, the simulation game not only creates a safe environment for learning through experience, but also forms the ability to empathize and the willingness of young people to become active agents of positive social change.

The national events were attended by 130 participants from four countries, representing the youth, civic, scientific and educational sectors. This diversity of participants provided a platform for the experience exchange, ideas and methodologies used in different national contexts. The events included discussions and interactive activities, which contributed to a deeper understanding of the essence of intercultural dialogue and the importance of ICC in everyday work with youth. According to the educators, participation in the national events strengthened their professional capacity, helped to build new partnerships and stimulated further search for innovative approaches in educating the younger generation in a multicultural society.

The results of piloting the materials, testing the simulation game and holding national events in four countries indicate the high effectiveness of the proposed tools in forming the youth ICC and increasing the professional capacity of youth workers. They not only proved the practical value of the developed materials and methods, but also confirmed the importance of creating a safe space for dialogue and exchange of experience. Thus, the project laid the foundation for the dissemination of innovative approaches in intercultural education, which will contribute to the upbringing of a generation capable of acting effectively in a globalized and multicultural world.

Thus, the use of such practices of non-formal education has confirmed its effectiveness in forming and deepening youth ICC, which is a key factor for its successful integration into the globalized world. The results of the participation of Ukrainian educational institutions in the project showed that the combination of project-based learning, simulations, reflective practices and cultural events creates conditions for the sustainable development of ICC. This proves that the systematic use of such innovative approaches in non-formal and formal education is able to form in young people the necessary skills for effective interaction in the globalized world.

**Conclusions**. Effective formation of the ICC involves the integration of formal, non-formal and informal education. A special role in this process is played by volunteer initiatives, academic mobility

programs and cultural exchanges, which allow young people to gain practical experience of interaction in a multicultural environment. Such approach contributes to strengthening the foundations of global citizenship, where mutual understanding and respect for cultural diversity are key values.

The study showed that the development of the ICC of youth through the practices of non-formal education is one of the key directions of education updating in Ukraine. In the challenging realities of wartime, such practices serve not only an educational but also a socio-psychological function: they contribute to supporting young people, forming social resilience, readiness for constructive interaction in a multicultural environment. An important contribution is the testing of the tools of the international project UTOPIA, which have proven their effectiveness in the development of the ICC of both school and university youth.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in the systematization and substantiation of the possibilities of non-formal education practices as an effective mechanism to form ICC. It was found that the effective development of ICC occurs due to the integration of formal, non-formal and informal education, which in the complex provides a combination of knowledge, practical experience and values.

We see prospects for further research in a more in-depth analysis of how different formats of non-formal education influence specific components of intercultural communicative competence, in examining the long-term effects of youth participation in international and intercultural programs, as well as in developing effective tools and criteria for measuring the dynamics of young people's intercultural competence. Such efforts will not only deepen theoretical approaches to the issue but also provide practical recommendations for educational institutions and youth organizations on integrating innovative methods into the educational process.

Thus, the development of ICC through non-formal education practices should be considered as a strategically important direction that contributes to improving the quality of education, forming active global citizens, and strengthening the social cohesion of Ukrainian society.

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