THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIO-CULTURAL COMPETENCE (SELF) DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract
Sociocultural competences are becoming increasingly important and significant in terms of employability, career, competitive abilities. Acquired and developed throughout one's lifetime, sociocultural competences create favourable conditions for successful survival and functioning in contemporary labour market. Effective teaching of methods of socialization is impossible without making an effort to conceptualize the key elements of culture in younger people's consciousness: principles of choice of values, basics of creativity, language, ethnos, art. The research aims at revealing the characteristics and orientations of formation of sociocultural competence that are characteristic of the VET processes. The following research methods have been used for the research: descriptive analysis of research sources and documents. Sociocultural competences manifest themselves in the processes of vocational education and training as a set of various abilities necessary for personal and professional life. Formation of sociocultural competences by teaching and learning in VET system is characterized by features based on value dimensions of the life of society and person: social skills (skills of communication, socialization and team work); social perception (skills of societal interpretation by proper choice of behaviour depending on social environment and situation); self-awareness (ability of performing analysis of own emotional state and helping other person perceive oneself and own emotions); attribution (ability to implement own potential in a social environment and analyse social roles); communication with peers (ability to adapt in a new environment by perceiving the attitudes that exist in it); cultural sensitivity (ability to understand and accept people from other sociocultural backgrounds, maintaining strong position when facing discriminatory actions); cultural awareness (ability to evaluate cultural differences and perceive and accept other person's attitudes and opinion); cultural knowledge (ability to communicate with people diplomatically, taking into account cultural differences).

Keywords: Sociocultural competence; Cultural competence Social competence; Teaching and learning; Vocational training.

Background
Sociocultural competences are becoming increasingly important and significant in terms of employability, career, competitive abilities. Acquired and developed throughout one's lifetime, sociocultural competences create favourable conditions for successful survival and functioning in contemporary labour market. Composition of sociocultural competences and their effect on socialization is determined to a great extent by the specific field of provision, acquisition and application of the respective competences. Learning under lifelong learning concept
forms a favourable medium for development of such competences. Initial and continuing vocational education and training (VET) both pursue the dual objective of contributing to employability and economic growth, and addressing common societal challenges by, primarily, promoting social cohesion (Bruges Communiqué, 2012).

Studies in the context of sociocultural competences have demonstrated that broader cultural knowledge and deeper values tend to determine better learning outcomes (Phillipson & Renshaw, 2013). Having analysed the influence of formation of sociocultural competences by teaching and learning on communication skills, Mak and Buckingham (2007) have concluded that formation of sociocultural competences may provide additional benefit, where it has been integrated into the general course on communication, meaning that formation of such competences should be integrated into general curriculum. Increasing significance of and demand for sociocultural competences in the modern active world challenges the Lithuanian VET. Effective teaching of methods of socialization is impossible without making an effort to conceptualize the key elements of culture in younger people's consciousness: principles of choice of values, basics of creativity, language, ethnos, art (Aleknaitė-Bieliauskienė, 2008).

Scientific literature analysis has demonstrated that the issues of sociocultural work have been studied more comprehensively (Trigger, 1998; Baršauskienė & Leliūgienė 2001; Spierts, 2003; Šinkūnienė & Savickaitė, 2008). Some of the authors (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Mak et al. 2000; Mak & Barker, 2004; Mak & Buckingham, 2007) have studied sociocultural competences in the context of multicultural and intercultural competences. Sociocultural aspects, perception of the importance of culture are also revealed through research work and development of curricula (McBride, 2011). On the other hand, the analysis has also shown insufficient methodological reasoning of the notion of sociocultural competences and the relating concepts. They have not been conceptualized through present societal and personal value-related challenges in life, education, nor have they been presented from the VET perspective. There is lack of research-based information on the VET potential in terms of formation of sociocultural competences by teaching and learning. There is also no systematic research that would integrate sociocultural competences based on values and relating to VET. The research aims at revealing the characteristics and orientations of formation of sociocultural competence that are characteristic of the VET processes.

**Theoretical insights into socio-cultural competence development/self-development**

Establishments of vocational education pursue the mission of enabling an individual to acquire the competences that would meet the demand of labour market and are necessary for the individual to be successfully integrated into professional and social environment. Where the material and presentation of qualifications and VET conform to the holistic approach towards a human being, processes taking place in the VET system enable its participants to form sociocultural competences besides other competences (McGrath, 2007).

This article is based on the concept of competence formulated under the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF, 2009). It defines competence as a proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities in work, studies, professional and personal development. In the context of the
EQF, competence is described in terms of *responsibility and autonomy*. This is related not only to special, but also generic competences that include sociocultural competences.

Sociocultural competences are attributed to the measures empowering a person to perceive oneself and the learning environment objectively. Sociocultural competence education should primarily be directed towards learners' real-life current and potential future needs by interpreting education under the new educational paradigm, namely, viewing education as an active process of creation of knowledge and meanings based on cooperation, continuous self-management and learner's experience, as well as happening in an environment that is as authentic as possible and involving real-life situations and contexts (Burgen, 1996).

Sociocultural conditions have particular significance in development of learning material. The material should reflect social, economic, and technological level of development of a country, current knowledge in various fields of science, i.e. it should comply with the existing cultural foundation of the society and be relevant to learners (Lipinskienė, 2002). Formation of sociocultural competence takes place in several dimensions: in the context of social competence through social perception, social skills, communication with peers, attribution, self-awareness; and in the context of cultural competence through cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity. Formation of sociocultural competences by learning in these dimensions is possible in several stages (Table 1).

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociocultural competences</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Abilities</th>
<th>Values</th>
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<tr>
<td>Social competence</td>
<td>Social perception</td>
<td>Social skills</td>
<td>Attribution</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Communication with peers</td>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural competence</td>
<td>Cultural knowledge</td>
<td>Cultural awareness</td>
<td>Cultural sensitivity</td>
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Sociocultural competence could be implemented by four components that link an individual to environment: i) initiative, ii) responsibility, iii) participation in an activity as an event, iv) individuality. Initiative is a significant prerequisite for formation and application of sociocultural competences as an individual initiative that implies the necessity to combine it with other individuals' initiatives (Zarifian, 2005). In other words, in their nature, initiatives should be open to the influence of other initiatives, while implementation of an initiative requires sociocultural communication and collaboration between different persons, which is a key component of effective combination of individual (personal) and collective resources (Fig. 1).

*Initiative* is defined as a person's obligation and determination to start something new and use the freedom of action. Being initiative means being able to mobilize and use various individual and collective resources in solution of various activity situations: Initiative is a very significant prerequisite for formation and application of sociocultural competences as an individual initiative that implies the necessity to combine it with other individuals' initiatives (Zarifian, 2005).
Responsibility, when viewed from the perspective of competence, also has two significant social dimensions: responsibility for compliance with various moral norms (responsibility for the moral consequences of an action) and caring for other people, their welfare (Zarifian, 2005).

Figure 1. *Initiative as a significant prerequisite for formation and application of sociocultural competences* (according to Zarifian, 2005)

*Participation in an activity as an event* is a person's commitment to be a part of social and cultural activity in order to combine practical activity guidelines with information flows.

*Individuality* manifests itself from the perspective of sociocultural competence through a person's ability to develop his values, seek education, and participate in experience-based activities.

Self-education does not take place when a 'portion' of information is received. It rather occurs in interaction with the environment involving change of perception, when the outlook and perception of environment itself starts changing (Biggs, 1999). Eurydice (2002), the European network on education systems and policies, notes that there is a shift from systematized and accurate knowledge to the implied knowledge that is integrated into learner's personal and societal competences. This is the outcome of development of a leaner's personality expected of education of sociocultural competences. Formation of sociocultural competences is a continuing process that passes from self-awareness to social skills that are necessary for polite communication and cooperation in various contexts (Lee & McChesney, 1999).

Self-analysis is important in formation of sociocultural competences. It is therefore important how a person perceives himself as a representative of a certain culture, as a social creature with specific world-view. Correct interpretation of transferred knowledge is only possible in case of high self-awareness. Formation of sociocultural competences in learning is important in that it helps a person perceive himself as a world citizen and trains to successfully operate sociocultural knowledge (Lee & McChesney, 1999).
Sociocultural competences are a complex phenomenon. Sociocultural competences are viewed as a possibility to apply multicultural knowledge, skills and values in the process of intercultural communication in certain specific life situation with the aim to ensure tolerance towards other people. Formation of sociocultural competences is comprised of three stages, each of them addressing certain challenges related to their respective goals (Safina, 2014):

Stage one is motivational, i.e. preparing psychologically for communication with learners (colleagues, students). The challenge of readiness, i.e. psychological state, is important at this stage, as the state determines a person's ability to perceive certain situation or assume actions. This stage is aimed at raising students' interest in acquisition of knowledge on people of various cultural and ethnic groups and at revealing cultural diversity to them with the ultimate goal of forming positive attitude towards sociocultural education and raising their interest in multicultural communication (Milrud, 2004). Teacher's main goal is not only to provide information about different cultures, but also change learners' behaviour towards other cultures. At this stage, it would be particularly useful to focus on watching documentaries, historical films, discussions on cultural heritage and traditions cultivated by regions. Main goal of such discussions is formation of communication culture. Awareness and understanding of the challenges, identification of various information, reflection in the context of knowledge, formation of debating skills, inclusion of knowledge into a new context are the main and key goals of discussions (Handford, 2002). If handled skilfully, discussion becomes the most important form of sociocultural education. When sociocultural values are reflected upon with the view towards the nature of work with the learners and are converted into learner's personal beliefs, tolerant relations gradually take their rightful place (Astashova, 2003). Moral value of the idea of a dialogue means objective awareness of diversity of nations, cultures, and people. Most important is that people show respect to each other and value cultural heritage of the community across the globe, irrespective of national or religious beliefs (McCafferty & Ahmed, 2000).

Stage two in formation of sociocultural competence is the informative stage. Main goal of this stage is acquisition and consolidation of knowledge gained from the learning material. Learning material is subject to continuous changes and developments in the learning process. Curriculum is not only what one hears or sees during a lesson, when information is clearly provided by a teacher or learner. It is also what a teacher and learner thinks, feels, experiences, what processes take place in their subconsciousness when they both face a representative of different culture, sociocultural background. The aim of education of sociocultural competences is not formation of a new subconsciousness, but rather its enrichment by initiation of a conceptual world-view. For this stage, Lee and McChesney (1999) have proposed giving students the tasks, where students are supposed to search, structurize the information and present it during the discussion, as well as ask questions. This could be a monologue, a topic for the debates or issue for discussion. This way a learner not only acquires information about a certain issue related to lack of sociocultural competences, but also enriches own knowledge that shape a new attitude towards people from other social layers who have their specific cultural awareness. Learning material should be related to intercultural context, contemporary attitudes, relevance, and reliability.
Another step of stage two involves organization of cooperation based on the activity focused on the topic, motivating and promoting communication between learners and a teacher. Role-play model is proposed for such activity. Under such model, students create situations and solve problems or conflicts in the created situations (Wenzel, 1991). This kind of game promotes creative thinking and polite communication. It also enables spontaneous and naturally progressing communication. Project work with learners is also important. Attribution of a particular topic to each groups of students is aimed at promoting not only learner's attention to the topic as such, but also learner's focus on literature analysis. Literature analysis promotes information sharing, which, on certain occasion, becomes more important than the project goal as such. The initial idea behind a project work is to engage learners into an activity-based learning situation, where they are free to choose what they wish to learn, create, meaning that project outcome is determined by their activity. Project presentations are intended to encourage a learner to present through reflections a live cultural life of a chosen region and traditions and customs observed by people living in that region. Conscious methods of comparative approach are based on the idea that the principle of comparative analysis is key in education of sociocultural competences, as it is what promotes intellectual growth in learners and development of the personality (Safina, 2014). Manifestation of learners' personal potential and excitation of their interests contributes to formation of sociocultural competences.

Stage three involves formation of the concept of sociocultural competences together with learners by defining its manifestations in a contemporary society. Education of sociocultural competences is a time consuming and complex process. VET, as a domain gathering people of various sociocultural backgrounds into a single space, has a great potential of solving this issue. Structure of sociocultural competences has been developed according to orientations of sociocultural competence education by Safina (2014); Wenzel (1991) and Handford (2002) (Table 2).

Structure presented in Table 2 is comprised of 3 components: 1) competence as such (referred to as dimensions), 2) their composition (of various skills), and 3) methods for formation of these categories. As suggested by the figure, all components are interrelated. It should be noted that social and cultural components have been presented separately from each other in order to demonstrate their respective composition. Nonetheless, it is in the author's opinion, based on analysis of scientific sources, that it is possible to refer to integration of social and cultural competences. As a result, two-way links between the components of competences have been provided in the chart. The chart reflects the idea emphasized in the article that one concept of sociocultural competence and formation of the competence by teaching and learning could be reasonably applied to the VET as well as general education.

The European strategy on VET, Bruges Communiqué on closer European cooperation in VET 2011-2020, has suggested that not only labour markets, but the society as well are subjected to rapid changes. People must be provided with conditions to acquire not only professional knowledge, but also other knowledge, skills and abilities – generic competences that are important for success in life. Learners in the VET system should be enabled to acquire and extend generic competences and apply them along with professional skills. Sociocultural competences have been identified as one of the key generic competences in the European Union (Recommendation
2006/962/EC), covering personal, interpersonal and intercultural skills, all forms of behaviour, enabling effective and constructive participation in social life and professional area, in particular, in an increasingly diverse society.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociocultural competence dimensions</th>
<th>Composition of sociocultural competences</th>
<th>Sociocultural competence formation methods / strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social competence</td>
<td>Integrated into educational curriculum:</td>
<td>• Education of skills of intercultural communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social skills</td>
<td>• Communication and socialization skills.</td>
<td>• Education of initiation of leadership and team work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Social perception</td>
<td>• Team work skills.</td>
<td>• Analysis and interpretation of various social situations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Self-awareness</td>
<td>• Skills of interpretation of social roles.</td>
<td>• Role plays in analysis of communication issues and conflict situations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Attribution</td>
<td>• Skills of adequate behaviour depending on the situation.</td>
<td>• Classroom debates for formation of ability to accept other person's opinion and remain tolerant by controlling own emotions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Communication with peers</td>
<td>• Abilities of perception of an emotional state.</td>
<td>• Reflective education.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ability to help others perceive own emotional state and control emotions.</td>
<td>• Work in groups in development of projects, generation of ideas.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Self-realization in a social environment.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Analysis of feelings related to social roles.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Ability to adapt to a new environment.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Ability to perceive attitudes that exist in a society.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural competence</td>
<td>• Ability of communication with people of different sociocultural backgrounds.</td>
<td>• Watching documentaries on various cultures with subsequent reflection.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Cultural sensitivity</td>
<td>• Ability of reasoning to support own position when facing discriminatory actions.</td>
<td>• Discussions in the context of ethnic minorities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Cultural awareness</td>
<td>• Ability of evaluation of cultural differences.</td>
<td>• Formation of such qualities as flexibility, openness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cultural knowledge</td>
<td>• Ability of accepting other's beliefs and attitudes.</td>
<td>• Discussion and analysis of customs and traditions of other ethnic groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Foreign language skills.</td>
<td>• Formation of knowledge on a foreign language involving not only language learning, but also provision of knowledge on the national culture.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ability of diplomatic communication with people of a certain culture, taking into account the respective cultural aspects.</td>
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Authors in other countries (MacDonald, 1980; Shergill, 1997; Boyle, 2002; Hopffer, 2005; Johnson, 2009) have studied the importance of formation of sociocultural competences by teaching and learning in VET, i.e. in preparation of specialists in certain fields. A number of different factors have been identified to influence person's life style, his/her culture, such as: identification of an ethnic identity; conditions of change in social and economic status, place of residence; gender, age, religion, physical capacity, etc. Person's culture is closely related to his/her system of values. These factors must be taken into account when forming sociocultural competences.

Sociocultural competences manifest themselves as a combination of various competences revealing the role of skills that are important in life. School, same as family (as a learner's immediate environment), promotes expression and development of sociocultural competences. Researchers (Bhabha, 1994; Baquedano - Lopez et al., 1999) have crystallized an idea that, in their work, teachers create a 'third space', where student's primary discourses (used by him/her at home, in a community, informal social interactions) and secondary discourses (based on school and other official establishments) intersect to form this third space that blends the primary and secondary discourses (Fig. 3).

**Figure 3.** Integration of students' knowledge and experience into formation of sociocultural competences by teaching and learning (according to Bhabha,1994; Baquedano – Lopez et al.,1999)

A specialist educator possessing adequate sociocultural competences (Leavitt, 2003):
- Is aware of the influence of culture. It is very important to understand that all people are 'immersed' into their culture, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour related to it. All of this determines their personal and professional interactions. It is, however, in human nature that every one of us tends to be conservative (i.e. to believe that our life style according to our culture is the norm and standard that should be used as a benchmark in evaluation of others). We tend to forget that another person may be as ethnocentric as we are. This kind of self-consciousness (or, more precisely, absence of it) is particularly important for educators working with students enrolling into VET establishments from different sociocultural backgrounds;
- Evaluates intercultural relations and remain alert about the dynamics caused by cultural differences. Intercultural interaction is accompanied by the risk of misinterpretation of other person's intentions and actions.
Each party of interaction presents a certain set of experience, personal and communication aspects. It is important to remain alert in the teaching and learning process and make efforts to minimize the risk of misinterpretation and misjudgement. Deeper insights made in communication and cooperation with students determine less stereotypical attitudes and maximum available development of mutually beneficial relationship;

- Develop their sociocultural knowledge and include this knowledge into their daily practice. The assumption is that where VET teachers are able to work effectively with learners from various layers, explore student's sociocultural context deeper, they can improve the process of learning and teaching without any negative effect. An educator should put effort into understanding and exploring student's sociocultural background and, based on this information, modify the method of communication and educational process. Thus, each party of interaction could assume that willingness to give and receive information leads to more effective cooperation and mutual understanding.

If teachers gave more attention to formation of the 'third space', more focus could be placed on integration of student's primary knowledge and experience into formation of sociocultural competences by teaching and learning.

Conclusions

Composition of sociocultural competences and their effect is determined directly by the specific field of provision, acquisition and application of the respective competences. By actualizing opportunities for lifelong learning, VET becomes a favourable medium for formation of such competences.

Sociocultural competences act in formation of person's social, cultural values and identity that, in turn, form the basis of a social actor's actions in a specific socio-professional field; they also are an integral and active part of a social actor's habitus helping realize and establish himself in the changing field, adapt to changes of professional, social, and cultural field; they are able to structure the process and contents of person's professional socialization by virtue of their composition, structure, diversity, choice and method of application.

Formation of sociocultural competences in the system of initial vocational education and training is enabled by the curriculum developed according to holistic approach towards a human being, as well as by the processes involved. This helps ensure that establishments of vocational education and training follow the mission of creating conditions for an individual to acquire the competences satisfying the demand of labour market and necessary for the individual to be successfully integrated into professional and social environment.
References


