THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN DEFINING PERSONAL IDENTITY IN THE POSTMODERN SOCIETY

Mihaela VOINEA

Transilvania University of Brasov, Romania

Abstract: *The article is focused on the effect of postmodern society on human and cultural identity and the role of intercultural education for defining personal identity. Nowadays the personal identity is caught in between localism and globalism, between nothing and something (G.Ritzer). The values which dominate our society are the postmodern values (which are presented in G. Lipovetsky`s opinion), hedonistic values, respect for differences, the cult of individual freedom and autonomy, free expression and personal affirmation. These postmodern values are a challenge for personal identity and education. Intercultural education is seen as a necessity and also as a solution to the problems of the contemporary world, where social skills, networking and cooperation, communication and the ability to adapt have become indispensable and help students define their identity. In order to observe how people define their personal identity nowadays, we initiated an observatory research on 200 people. The subjects were divided into two categories: the youth representing the postmodernist, globalized society (students aged between 18 and 22) and the adults, representing the traditional society (aged between 50 and 60). They were given questionnaires concerning the way they define or find themselves. The results of our research showed that the intercultural education has a strong impact on (re)defining personal identity in postmodern society.*

Keywords: *personal identity, postmodern society, intercultural education*

1. INTRODUCTION

The globalized society is defined by a series of paradoxical features, in the view of socio-humanistic specialists. One of the paradoxes is excellently emphasized by G. Ritzer in his work 'The Globalization of Nothingness', where he describes the ways in which 'the nothing' (i.e. the things, deeds and people labelled according to certain standards) becomes a more and more defining part of our existence. It is to be noted that the characteristics of an ever-changing society, currently undergoing the process of globalization are to be observed best at an individual level. This society is based on a multitude of contradicting values such as: local vs. Global, the masses vs. the individual, personal vs. anonymous, quantity vs. quality, communion vs. isolation etc.

A. Neculau, for instance, analyses 'the way of life between standardization and personalisation' laying emphasis on the idea of redefining the notions of social relations, identity, citizenship.

In a world currently undergoing the process of globalization, in which the frontiers tend to become symbolic, one clearly needs to redefine concepts in order to better know and understand himself and the others. 'Learning to live with the others' has become one of the milestones of today's education (Delors, 2000:74)

2. THE PERSONAL IDENTITY IN POSTMODERN SOCIETY

Globalization and all that it entails is but a mere part of the issue related to redefining one's identity as reported not only to the local community, but to the national, international,

even planetary one. To this aim, the main objective of education is 'to render the diversity of the human race and raise awareness on the likenesses between individuals and on their interdependence'. (Delors, 2000:75)

David Lyon notes another issue which is still related to the individuals' identity in today's society. He states that 'projecting the self is translated in owning a series of desired goods and leading some artificially created lifestyles' because 'the mediated experience is involved in the contemporary structuring of the self'(Lyon, 1989:102-103)

It seems that this mediated experience plays a major part in structuring the conception of the individuals on the world and life in general, having both positive and negative effects on the individual and social relations scales alike.

Although some authors (R. Silverstone) state that the mass-media (the T.V. and more recently internet in particular) promote a lifestyle which has helped people adapt to certain demands of the current society, most authors underline the negative effects of the media, such as: turning the auditorium into an infantile one, rendering the culture vulgar, promoting mediocre role-models, promoting a fake conception upon family life, etc.

To sustain this idea, Roger Silverstone states 'the T.V. is, both from a historical and a social point of view, a means of communication of the suburbia' (Silverstone, 1999:66). 'it is suburban because of the structure and content of its programs. It is suburban because of its inclusion in everyday life, because of the way in which it expresses the specific balance between isolation and integration, uniformity and variety, cultures and identities (both global and restraint), which are indeed the mark of suburban existence' (R. Silverstone, 1999:71).

The Romanian specialists also share these opinions. When talking about the risks of an informational society, C. Cuco , for instance, shows that 'a new society is born-that of the anonymous –less responsible, where too many things are allowed (...) and despite the fake

idea of togetherness and communication, the bond between the individuals disappears as they become isolated and lonely in front of motionless machines' (Cucoş, 2006:100).

Globalization attracts, as C. Bârzea shows, the need to redefine the concepts of citizenship, democracy, cultural identity (Bârzea, 2001).

Nowadays the answer to the question "How am I?" is no longer definite, nor final. The answer is complex and dynamic, because the identity in postmodern society is dynamic.

The students are postmodern and the teachers are modern and this is a real aspect of school today. This is a challenge for teachers. As a result, teachers are forces to develop new relational and methodological competences. They must make school more attractive for students. Therefore they must develop new didactical strategies which promote cooperative learning, tolerance and democracy, critical thinking and positive attitude to change. The roles of teachers today are more and complex. The teachers can help students to define themselves if they offer the model. Teachers need to provide models of leadership, critical thinking, democracy

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

Considering all these issues specific to postmodern society, the question that arises is: What is happening to the notion of 'identity'? How do youngsters define themselves nowadays? How can education help them define their own way of being?

To come up with an answer, we have undertaken a research on 200 subjects divided into two categories, namely: teenagers, representatives of the postmodern society and adults, representatives of the modern society. The main objective of the research was to identify the way in which teenagers and adults define themselves in the post-modern, globalized society. The hypotheses were:

1. We presume that there is a connection between the way in which the teenagers and the adults define their identity (self-image) and the values promoted by society.

2. There is a connection between participating in the Intercultural Education lecture/discipline and the way in which the teenagers define themselves.

The subjects had to answer two questionnaires. One concerning the individual values, the role of education in defining a system of values and another one concerning the image of the self from a real perspective ('how I am') and from an ideal one 'how I'd like to be).

In the case of the first questionnaire, the subjects had to tick all the options they thought they possessed from a list of features, and in the case of the second questionnaire they had to tick the options they would like to possess. The feature list also included features specific to the contemporary society, such as: tolerant, flexible, pragmatic, dynamic, non-conformist.

Two focus-groups were created (one for the teenagers and the other for the adults), debating issues on identity in the globalized society and the role of education in general, and that of intercultural education in particular in defining personal identity.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire data analysis has revealed the fact that the particularities of society influence the way in which people define their own system of values. The questionnaire on the self-image of the two categories of subjects has revealed differences between the image of the self of teenagers and the one of adults. To illustrate, most teenagers see themselves as dynamic (73%), sociable (64%), tolerant (68%), open to the new (63%), creative (54%), non-conformist (43%), ecologists (56%). The current society and educational system reflects on their image of the self.

By way of contrast, most adults see themselves as pragmatic, competent, sociable, responsible, faithful citizens. It is the 'classical' image of an adult (in any society!) The analysis of the focus-group data has revealed significant differences (as expected) between the self-definitions given by teenagers

and those given by adults. Beside the natural differences between the two categories of subjects, we note that teenagers have a wider scope of self-defining (for instance, a lot of teenagers see themselves as representatives not only of an age group or of a nation, but rather as representatives of the whole world!!).

As opposed to the teenagers, adults define themselves through the social parts that they play (husband/wife, parent, professional), sticking to the classical definition of the adult (similar to the one Freud had given in the past –an adult is a person who works and loves).

Apart from these differences, both teenagers and adults make efforts in order to integrate features of the contemporary society to their image of the self, thus reflecting a common effort to adapt to society's demands.

Teenagers and adults alike have positively appreciated the part that mass-media play in promoting some specific values of contemporary society: tolerance, environment protection, reduction of violence, fighting discrimination etc. Adults state that for them, T.V. shows are the main means of defining some conceptions on contemporary society.

In the case of the subjects who have attended the intercultural education lectures, the definition of values is far more obvious. Most of the subjects who have taken part in the research have expressed an opinion according to which 'intercultural education has helped them clarify their own system of values'. Another benefit which intercultural education has brought is that the subjects have become aware of the fact that it is normal for different people to have different values, but the meaning of these values could be negotiated in order to favour communication and cooperation. The tendency to place the values in the category of 'something' is a lot higher with the subjects who have attended the intercultural communication lectures.

5. CONCLUSIONS & ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Although one of the limitations of this study is the reduced number of subjects, which

does not allow general conclusions, one can analyse the main tendencies which are shaped in this study.

One of the conclusions of the conducted research is that education in general, and intercultural education in particular contributes, via the values that they promote, to the definition of personal identity. The image differences perceived between the two categories are also related to the educational background of the subjects. Teenagers, for example, have studied disciplines such as environment education, civic education, and intercultural education. These disciplines promote values related to the environment, tolerance, democracy, human rights, stereotypes etc. which have an impact on the teenagers' behaviour, their life conception and last but not least, their self-image. Society also contributes to shaping the life conception of the adults, either by the values it promotes through the mass-media (i.e. humanitarian campaigns on environment protection, health, children's rights, minorities' rights etc.) or via various social institutions or organisations.

Another practical conclusion to be drawn from this research is the introduction of the discipline of intercultural education in the national curriculum as a mandatory one for all educational levels. The research enrichment perspectives are: enlarging the study on a national level sample and studying the impact of the mass-media on defining the self-image of teenagers as compared to adults.

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