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EDUCATING FOR BELONGING: MULTILINGUALISM, DIVERSITY AND EUROPEAN VALUES

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***Abstract:** This paper examines the role of education in fostering a sense of belonging among children growing up in multilingual and culturally diverse environments, in the context of European values. Based on an interdisciplinary approach—encompassing psychological, pedagogical, and socio-political perspectives—the study analyzes the processes through which bilingual and multilingual children develop both national and European identities. The paper highlights three key components: **multilingualism** as a resource for cognitive and cultural development; **cultural diversity** as both a challenge and an opportunity for social integration; and **European values** as the foundation for civic education. Through the analysis of practices from Bulgaria and other European contexts, the paper proposes concrete pedagogical strategies and examples of inclusive education. It emphasizes the role of the teacher as a mediator in the process of educating for belonging, as well as the importance of intercultural sensitivity and dialogical environments in schools. The study concludes that educating for belonging is a fundamental element of contemporary education and a key to building open, democratic, and tolerant societies in the spirit of a united Europe.*

***Keywords:** bilingualism, European values, national identity, intercultural education, inclusion.*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, characterized by accelerated transformations and the dynamic nature of the social environment, there arises a need for a new type of pedagogical approach. As Prof. DSc Julia Doncheva notes:

“In order to build successful learning strategies, it is essential to understand the context of social development. A careful study of social processes is more urgent today, precisely in this time of paradigm shift inherited from the industrial age of information. The revolution born from the convergence of computerization, communication tools, and media is the most powerful force shaping the world today. The new developments are expressed through human capabilities and their ‘smart interfaces,’ such as computer and communication technologies.” (Doncheva, J., 2017)

This analysis emphasizes that educating for belonging cannot be considered in isolation from the cultural, technological, and socio-historical context in which it takes place. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the new paradigms that influence students’ identity and socialization is necessary.

In today’s globalized world, where cultures intersect, borders fade, and mobility becomes increasingly intense, the issue of belonging takes on central importance. The oversaturation of information, multicultural societies, and linguistic diversity demand new approaches in education – approaches that not only prepare individuals for professional realization but also develop citizens with a sense of responsibility, solidarity, and belonging to a larger community – that of

Europe and humanity. In an age of globalization and migration, education is called upon not only to prepare individuals for the labor market but to foster citizens with a sense of belonging to a broader, diverse, and value-based community. Multilingualism, cultural diversity, and European values are the three pillars through which the educational system can respond to this challenge.

This paper examines the possibilities of education as a tool for fostering belonging through three interconnected aspects: multilingualism, cultural diversity, and European values. The approach is pedagogical-philosophical, focusing on civic education, identity, and social justice, and offers specific directions and examples for implementation.

EXPOSITION

Belonging as a Philosophical and Pedagogical Concept

Belonging is not merely a social label but a state of mind, a sense of identity, security, and meaning. It is a fundamental human need – to be part of a community, to be accepted, to have a place and a role. Philosopher Martin Buber emphasized that "man is built through relationships" – through encounter with the Other. According to Maslow, the sense of belonging is among the basic levels of human motivation. In this sense, the school is a space where such encounters are cultivated – dialogical, meaningful, and respectful. Pedagogically, this means creating an environment in which every student, regardless of their background, feels valued, understood, and included.

From a philosophical standpoint, belonging is not merely a social status but a dynamic process of identification, mutual recognition, and dialogue. In the context of multicultural education, it is realized through the cultivation of empathy, intercultural sensitivity, and peaceful coexistence skills.

Practical Approaches:

Incorporating social-emotional learning (SEL) methods.

Conducting class hours dedicated to identity, inclusion, and diversity.

Building a "school culture" where every child feels seen and respected.

At the heart of this process of mutual recognition and dialogue lies language—not merely as a tool for communication, but as a living expression of cultural identity and memory. This is precisely why we must turn our attention to multilingualism as an educational and socio-cultural resource through which belonging can not only be articulated but also fully experienced.

Multilingualism – A Bridge between Cultures and Identities *Quote:* "To speak a language is to take on a world." – Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1953).

Language is not merely a communication tool – it is a carrier of cultural memory, identity, and worldview. Multilingualism in education is not an end in itself but a key to integration, cultural understanding, and personal development.

Benefits of Multilingualism:

Cognitive: Enhances abstract thinking, problem-solving, and creativity.

Cultural: Opens awareness to other worldviews, values, and ways of life.

Social: Facilitates integration and reduces prejudice.

In the European context, multilingualism is regarded as a strategic priority – a core principle of EU language policy. The European Commission encourages the learning of at least two foreign languages from an early age. This not only facilitates mobility but also fosters a sense of shared cultural identity.

Challenges:

Unequal access to language education.

Marginalization of minority languages.

Low motivation in some students.

The solution lies in creating a motivational, inclusive, and culturally sensitive educational environment that values all languages as a richness rather than an obstacle. Multilingualism is not a luxury, but a necessity. According to the European Commission: "Language diversity is one of Europe's greatest treasures" – (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment – Companion Volume, European Commission, 2018).

Practical examples:

Erasmus+ program – provides students the opportunity to participate in exchange programs and practice foreign languages in a real environment.

eTwinning – an online platform where school classes from different countries collaborate on projects.

In some Bulgarian schools, language days are introduced, where students present cultures and languages from different countries (including their native languages).

After exploring linguistic diversity as a key tool for intercultural communication and personal development, it is natural to expand the focus to broader cultural diversity, which shapes the social fabric of the modern European school.

Cultural Diversity as a Resource, Not a Threat

Quote: "Where there is no diversity, there is no choice. And where there is no choice, there is no freedom." – Isaiah Berlin (Berlin, I. (2002).

Education for belonging must overcome the tendency toward homogenization and embrace diversity as an asset. In today's multicultural European classrooms, students bring with them different languages, traditions, and cultural codes. This creates opportunities for mutual enrichment, but also risks of isolation and conflict.

How can cultural diversity become a resource?

Through intercultural education – integrating content that reflects cultural multiplicity.

Through teacher training – developing sensitivity to differences and avoiding stereotypes.

Through family and community involvement – building bridges between school and the student's cultural environment.

The key role here belongs to the teacher as a mediator who fosters an atmosphere of respect, dialogue, and mutual learning.

European identity is not based on ethnic or religious homogeneity but on diversity, tolerance, and mutual enrichment. This is explicitly stated in Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union: "The Union respects cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity." (European Union. (2012, October 26):

Practical Approaches:

Intercultural education: themes about traditions, holidays, and customs of different ethnic groups.

Project-based learning: e.g., creating a "Cultural Map of the Class" where students present their family roots.

Partnership with parents: organizing meetings with representatives of different cultural communities.

Having examined cultural diversity and intercultural education as key resources for building an inclusive and empathetic learning environment, the logical next step is to turn our attention to the value-based foundation that gives meaning and direction to this diversity – namely, the European values. These values do not merely accompany the educational process; they legitimize it as part of a broader moral and historical project, in which "The Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity" (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, Article 22).

European Values – A Foundation for Civic Education

Quote: "Europe has never been a geographical fact – it is a moral project." – Emmanuel Macron (Macron, E. on 26 September (2017)

Belonging to Europe is not just a geographical concept – it is a value-based identification. European values – human rights, democracy, equality, tolerance, solidarity, and rule of law – must be at the heart of the educational process. Education plays a vital role in building European citizenship – a sense of responsibility toward society, activism, and engagement.

This is achieved through:

Civic education – teaching about institutions, rights, and responsibilities.

Participation in student self-governance and volunteer initiatives.

International educational programs (*Erasmus+*, *eTwinning*) – foster a sense of connection and common purpose.

European identity should not exclude national or local identity – on the contrary, it complements them, creating a layered identity in which different levels of belonging coexist.

Education for belonging to Europe is built on the common values outlined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union: "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of minorities."

Examples from Practice:

Introduction of civic education classes (including in the Bulgarian educational system since 2020).

Simulated debates and EU models – e.g., European Youth Parliament.

Participation in school councils and community project implementation – learning through engagement.

Updating civic education in the context of European values inevitably places the teacher at the center of the pedagogical process—not only as an implementer of policies, but also as a key mediator in the transfer of values, identities, and a sense of belonging.

The Teacher as an Agent of Belonging

The teacher is not just a transmitter of knowledge but an educator, leader, and role model. Educating for belonging requires the teacher to:

Build an inclusive environment.

Promote multilingualism and cultural exchange.

Foster civic engagement and critical thinking in students.

The teacher's role is exceptional – not merely a mediator between student and knowledge but between child and the world. Essential qualities for educating for belonging include:

Cultural sensitivity – understanding students' different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Modeling values – through behavior, language, and attitude.

The school should function as a laboratory for democracy—a space where values such as tolerance, solidarity, mutual respect, and civic engagement are practiced on a daily basis. This means not merely teaching theoretical knowledge about democratic principles, but creating opportunities for students to experience them in a real school environment.

Through participation in student self-government, debates, election simulations, intercultural initiatives, or volunteer campaigns, students develop a sense of belonging to the school community and an awareness of the significance of their own voice. For example, within the eTwinning initiative, students from different European countries collaborate on joint projects, sharing experiences, cultures, and ideas, which fosters the development of a transnational identity based on cooperation and mutual respect.

Example: In some schools in Plovdiv and Razgrad, bilingual education practices are being implemented, tailored to the ethnic composition of the region.

CONCLUSION

Education for belonging through multilingualism, cultural diversity, and European values is not merely a modern slogan—it is a necessity in the 21st-century world. Only through inclusive and values-based education can we build societies where differences do not divide but enrich. Education for belonging is more than an educational goal—it is the foundation of a peaceful, just, and solidaristic society. Multilingualism develops the mind, cultural diversity nurtures the heart, and European values elevate the spirit. United as one, they shape individuals who know where they come from, where they belong, and where they are headed.

The report emphasizes three key components: multilingualism as a resource for cognitive and cultural development; cultural diversity as both a challenge and an opportunity for social integration; and European values as the basis for fostering civic consciousness. Through the analysis of practices from Bulgaria and other European contexts, it presents concrete pedagogical strategies and examples of inclusive education. The importance of the teacher is highlighted—as a mediator in the process of fostering belonging, as well as the need for intercultural sensitivity and dialogical approaches within the school environment.

To educate a child in the spirit of openness, tolerance, and responsibility means to raise a future citizen of Europe—not only geographically, but also in spirit and values.

The report concludes that education for belonging is a foundational element of modern education and a key to building open, democratic, and tolerant societies in the spirit of a united Europe.

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