CULTURAL LITERACY EDUCATION IN LATVIA: CURRICULA REVIEW

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Abstract

Cultural literacy has been designated as strategically important to sustainable development in Latvia. It reflects the country’s distinctive history. Following the restoration of independence in 1990, policy-making prioritised both the reconstruction and development of Latvian national identity and the preservation and development of Latvian cultural heritage.

The aim of the research is to analyse how “cultural heritage”, “cultural knowledge” and “participation” are reflected in the Latvian curricula that manage the educational process. The research also draws attention to how the European cultural heritage is understood in Latvian curricula, and how it relates to the concept of Latvian cultural heritage, focusing on the concepts of cultural identity and diversity.

A systematic search for curricula examining cultural literacy education in formal education system was carried out using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework resulting in two documents. The curricula or parts of these curricula relating to the age group 14-18 years were selected from both documents. Draft Regulations “Regulations Regarding the State Standard in Basic Education and Model Basic Educational Programmes” was also used as an additional source when looking at the education reform currently being implemented in Latvia. A thematic analysis of the documents was undertaken using an iterative, inductive approach to the generation of codes and themes guided by the review aims and objectives.

The analysis of general education curricula shows that cultural literacy education in Latvia differs depending on the educational programme. At secondary school level, it is possible to choose a variety of educational pathways, which offer wider or narrower knowledge in the field of culture (the most extensive knowledge can be obtained by following a humanitarian and social sciences related programme). Irrespective of the programme, additional subjects can be chosen, and these are often culture-related subjects. Students of ethnic minority schools acquire specific knowledge of both the Latvian culture and their own ethnic culture and based on their personal experience have a better understanding of multiculturalism.

Keywords: Cultural literacy, Cultural heritage, Participation, General education, Curricula, Thematic analysis.

1 INTRODUCTION

In Latvia’s policy documents, culture of Latvia is understood as culture of the state of Latvia, which includes culture of Latvians, the country’s indigenous people, and culture of all diasporas living in Latvia. Latvia has long been a multinational and multilingual country, and this peculiarity is highlighted at the level of today’s official policy as an important value for Latvia at both national and international levels. The cultural heritage of Latvia preserved to this day consists of a set of spiritual and material values of the entire population of Latvia regardless of ethnicity. Modern curricula support and introduce the mentioned understanding of culture in the education system. In order to consistently adhere to the strategic cultural guidelines of policy documents, the education reform is underway and will contribute to modern acquisition of culture at schools.

The aim of the article is to describe how “cultural heritage”, “cultural knowledge” and “participation” are reflected in the Latvian curricula that manage the educational process. The article also draws attention to how the European cultural heritage is understood in Latvian curricula, and how it relates to the concept of Latvian cultural heritage, focusing on the concepts of cultural identity and diversity.

In 2018, amendments to the Law on Education (Izglītības likums, 1998) and the Law on General Education (Vispārējās izglītības likums, 1999) brought education together into a single system to ensure continuity across all stages of education (from pre-school to grade 12). The amendments followed the first wholesale review of training since the restoration of independence and set the terms
for the introduction of new education content, which will provide a basis for a transition to competence-based learning. This approach has been introduced to overcome the consequences of the economic and financial crisis and reflect eight key competences defined at the EU level. These represent a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are considered necessary for personal fulfilment and development; active citizenship; social inclusion; and employment:

- Communication in the mother tongue;
- Communication in foreign languages;
- Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology;
- Digital competence;
- Learning to learn;
- Social and civic competences;
- Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship;
- Cultural awareness and expression [1].

Education content is revised in the light of reports and policy documents both produced domestically and at European level (e.g. the European Commission’s report Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes [2] and Developing Key Competences at School in Europe: Challenges and Opportunities for Policy [1]).

2 METHODOLOGY

A systematic search for eligible sources examining cultural literacy education, cultural practices and cultural heritage, was carried out using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework [3].

Two policy documents, whose annexes contain curricula of all education levels, were identified:

- Regulations Regarding the State Curriculum in Basic Education, the Subjects of Study Curricula in Basic Education and Model Basic Educational Programmes [4];
- Regulations Regarding the State General Secondary Education Curriculum, Subject Curricula and Sample Education Programmes [5].

In accordance with PRISMA guidelines, the following data were extracted from the eligible documents: title, year, source, and type. A thematic analysis of the documents was undertaken using an iterative, inductive approach to the generation of codes and themes guided by the review aims and objectives. The coding was carried out by using NVivo software. The coded material was used for the purpose of carrying out the thematic analysis. Academic literature and statistical resources were used to describe the historical and social context. In order to ensure critical analysis, the information provided in policy documents on cultural policy priorities in the country was compared with the cultural education system offered by curricula.

Draft Regulations “Regulations Regarding the State Standard in Basic Education and Model Basic Educational Programmes” [6] (further in the article: Draft of the New Curriculum) was also used as an additional source when looking at the education reform currently being implemented in Latvia.

3 RESULTS

3.1 General Characteristics of Curricula

Both regulations, State Basic Education Curriculum and State General Secondary Education Curriculum, include references to the Education Law, which is the main official policy document of the Latvian education system. The regulations define specific objectives and tasks to be carried out at the level of basic and secondary education. The annexes to these two documents contain subject curricula for specific areas, which are structured as follows: (1) Purpose and tasks of the subject; (2) Mandatory content of the subject; (3) Essential requirements for each subject.

State Basic Education Curriculum: The basic education curricula include eight main tasks of basic education programmes, including two contributing to the development of students’ cultural literacy,
namely: (1) To ensure experience in creative activities; (2) To develop basic understanding on the cultural heritage of Latvia, Europe and the world.

State General Secondary Education Curriculum: Students enrolled in general secondary education can choose one of the four directions: (1) General education; (2) Social sciences and humanities; (3) Mathematics, natural sciences and technology, (4) Vocational education (provided in general vocational secondary schools).

All training programs offer education in Latvian as well as in minority languages.

The mandatory content of general secondary education programs includes six areas each consisting of several subjects: languages; mathematics and computer science; sports and health education; natural sciences; social sciences; arts.

There is a relatively large focus on cultural literacy education at this level of education with several tasks related to the development of cultural literacy of students, such as:

- To reach a deeper understanding of the role of the Latvian language in a multicultural society;
- To improve the competence of Latvian, minority languages (minority education programmes) and foreign languages as a means of personal mental, intellectual development and self-realisation in a multicultural society;
- To improve the understanding of cultural diversity in the context of Latvian and global cultural values;
- To promote knowledge of different cultures, cultural values and awareness of national identity;
- To promote the development of emotional and creative capacities of learners by improving their experience with creative activities;
- To promote interest in and understanding of one’s own place in society, Latvian and global cultural heritage, responsible integration into cultural development based on democratic principles and humanitarian values;
- To improve understanding of the socio-economic nature of society and diversity of its structure.

3.2 Understanding of Culture in Subject Curricula

Issues related to pupils’ cultural literacy education can be found in almost all subject curricula at basic education and general education levels, but in the subjects related to Natural Sciences or Health and Sports education the link to culture is very vague or formal. Here, the specific knowledge of subjects like Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, etc., as well as terminology and the ability of pupils to apply them in their daily life are considered an integral part of the speech culture, which helps them to ensure success in human, public and environmental interactions.

Subject curricula demonstrate that the main objective of the learning process is the purchase of knowledge, skills and competences of the subject matter. The teaching content of each subject usually contains one area, which may be associated with culture to a greater or lesser extent. As a result, in every subject pupils gain deep knowledge concentrating on a narrow field. Even in the subject curricula of the Humanities, there is no indication of whether the specific knowledge of the subject is linked to the overall picture of cultural development processes in society, and how this knowledge could contribute to the involvement of students in cultural activities, etc.

The analysis of general education curricula shows that cultural literacy education in Latvia differs depending on the educational program. At secondary school level, it is possible to choose a variety of educational pathways, which offer wider or narrower knowledge in the field of culture (the most extensive knowledge can be obtained by following a humanities and social sciences related program). Irrespective of the program, additional subjects can be chosen, and these are often culture-related subjects. Pupils of ethnic minority schools acquire specific knowledge of both the Latvian culture and their own ethnic culture and based on their personal experience have a better understanding of multiculturalism.

Culturology is the only subject dealing with general cultural developments and topical issues in the socio-economic and political context of society development. Other subjects raise cultural awareness by going deep into one specific area (Art, Music, History, etc.), utilizing the chronological approach. The primary task is to provide knowledge rather than encourage thinking, analysis, comparison, etc.
In order to demonstrate how the purchase of specific elements of knowledge dominates in the study content of specific subjects, we will use the information from the curricula of Latvian and World History (secondary education level) as an example. The objectives of this subject are defined as follows:

- To become aware of the importance of history knowledge in the understanding of the past and in the choice of possible alternatives for personal growth and development of society;
- To improve knowledge and understanding of the most important events, causations, processes of the history of Latvia, Europe and the world;
- To deepen knowledge and understanding of the historical development of Latvian statehood;
- To develop skills of analysis and synthesis when examining sources of history in order to be able to carry out an independent and argument-based assessment of historical developments and relationships between the past and the present [5].

These tasks focus solely on the development of history knowledge. The terms “culture”, “identity”, etc. are not mentioned in the tasks of this subject and are not considered important. Although the content of this subject contains the component “Culture in time and space”, the emphasis again is put mainly on the processes of history (including the specificities of economic and social development of society) rather than on the overview of cultural processes and phenomena. Moreover, history and culture are viewed apart from each other, i.e. history and cultural topics are defined separately. The description of the subject Latvian and World History mentions culture only on a fragmented basis when viewing individual stages of history. There is no information on whether this subject deals with the cultural phenomena, such as painting, architecture, theatre, etc. In this curriculum, culture is undermined by history, it is viewed primarily in chronological development, focusing on the history of religions, differences in Western and Eastern civilizations and achievements and the Latvian cultural heritage.

A similar situation of focusing on a narrowly specific content can be seen in the curricula of other subjects of social sciences and humanities, such as Geography, Philosophy, Politics and Law, etc. The curricula of these subjects refer to the content component “Culture in Time and Space”, which includes topics relating to general trends in public development pertaining to the specific subject.

In the State Basic Education Curriculum and the State General Secondary Education Curriculum, there is an overall diverse, controversial and very broad understanding of culture, which includes essentially all developmental processes of society – political, historical, social, domestic, etc. It is generally stressed that cultural literacy is one of the essential requirements for learning each subject, including the knowledge of history, attitude towards nature, work, health, etc. The curricula of social sciences and humanities subjects, which are not directly related to provision of cultural knowledge and skills, do not mention specific requirements or training measures to develop cultural literacy of pupils.

In curricula, the concept of “culture” is often used in a relatively specific sense, mainly linked to a very traditional cultural understanding, by highlighting topics, such as cultural heritage, cultural diversity, different ethnic cultures, domestic culture, etc.

### 3.3 Education Reform: Transition to Teaching in Latvian in Ethnic Minority Schools

Education reform is currently the most topical issue of the Latvian education system, which is undergoing serious changes. The existing education curricula are obsolete, therefore new ones are being developed. Changes in the education system will be gradually introduced as of the school year 2019/2020.

The origins of the knowledge-based, traditional education model go back to the period of Latvia’s first independence. The model, which was also pursued in Soviet-time education, undergoes changes today through the introduction of the education reform. This is the most pressing issue in Latvia’s education nowadays. The reform concerns two significant aspects of education:

- a gradual transition to Latvian as the language of instruction in ethnic minority schools will take place from 1 September 2019 to the school year 2021/2022;
- the learning content has to be changed by introducing competence approach.

Draft of the new curriculum intends to give greater attention to development of natural sciences and mathematics by introducing a competence approach and establishing a link between subjects when highlighting the role of sciences.
The Ministry of Education and Science has initiated significant changes in the educational approach in Latvia in order to review the content of learning and the type of teaching for the first time in a unified system and during all stages of education. The Ministry of Education and Science points out that the amendments do not contain discriminatory clauses against any of the ethnic minorities, but, on the contrary, promote the acquisition of the Latvian language for all. In the context of the reform, ethnic minority pupils will maintain an opportunity to study their language and literature, as well as subjects related to their culture and history in their mother tongue as part of efforts to preserve their ethnic identity, which is a right determined by the Constitution [7].

There are two major targets in this reform: First, it is important to provide equal opportunities for every child in Latvia to receive quality education, which contributes to acquiring the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes in the 21st century. The new language of instruction framework will expand the opportunities of young people from ethnic minorities in vocational and higher education, where training takes place in Latvian, and it will also promote their competiveness in the labour market [8]. Second, the role of the Latvian language among the population should be strengthened. The Latvian language and culture should be regarded as the foundation for the unification of peoples living in Latvia, therefore society and the state should aim at preserving the language and making sure that the values of national identity, civil society and public integration are maintained in the long term [9].

Transition to Latvian as the language of instruction led to protests by ethnic minority representatives, who pointed out that such an approach restricts minority rights [10]. The Russian ambassador to Latvia opposed the transition to teaching in Latvian during the secondary school phase in 2017, indicating that Russian representatives have the right to learn in Russian in Latvia, and that the introduction of the education reform means a violent assimilation of representatives of Russians. Opponents of the reform believe that the transition to teaching in Latvian will lead to deterioration of learning achievements in minority schools. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education and Science does not share this opinion and emphasises that the reform, on the contrary, places a greater focus on Latvian language training therefore learning achievements could only improve. Opponents of the education reform do not provide a vision of how children of ethnic minority schools who acquire education only in their mother tongue can successfully obtain higher education in Latvia and become part of the Latvian labour market [7].

Disagreements regarding the transition to learning in Latvian at ethnic minority schools are related to the historical, political and social peculiarities of the Latvian cultural environment. Cultural issues in Latvia are both very topical and sensitive for a number of reasons. At the level of the official state cultural policy, it is defined that it is important for Latvia to preserve and develop its identity, language, national cultural values and lifestyle. “The Latvian language and culture also constitute a unifying foundation of Latvian society therefore the aim of society and that of the country is to nurture the language and take care of values of national identity, civil society and society integration in the long term.”[11]. Knowledge of cultural heritage contributes to the unity of the nation and belonging to the cultural space of Latvia regardless of ethnicity. Culture of Latvia is defined as open and ready for contacts and interaction with other European and world cultures, thereby ensuring mutual enrichment. Dismissing the idea that nationalism can be based on ethnic purity, Guidelines on National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy 2012–2018 [12] offer the description of national identity in Latvia as a phenomenon including the idea of each nation’s uniqueness but not its superiority. However, views of different ethnic groups concerning understanding of cultural issues diverge. Public cohesion is affected by the population’s social (cultural) memory. Over the past 15 years, attitudes to events of the XX century, i.e. the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia, the Soviet and Nazi occupations, World War II, the collapse of the USSR and the regaining of independence, have polarised Latvia’s society. These historical events and the associated remembrance practices still maintain a symbolic confrontation between Latvians and Russian-speaking people based on different biographical experience and different external sources of historical knowledge. Latvian- and Russian-speaking people have significant differences in attitudes to historical events of the past which determine the reserved attitude of minorities towards the Latvian culture and the national identity of Latvia. Studies show that young people’s sensitivity to historical topics, which are perceived more sharply by older generations, has significantly diminished [13].

A relatively large number of people, whose native language is Russian (the results of the 2011 census suggest that 56.3% of Latvia’s population use Latvian at home, whereas the Russian language is used at home by 33.8% of Latvia’s population), serves as a serious argument in favour of the idea proposed by different political forces concerning the introduction of the second official language in the country, as well as regarding the functioning of the Latvian language in the education system.
The basis of the confrontations is mainly the struggle of different political forces rather than the position of Latvia’s population. Evidence of this is, e.g. the results of the 2012 referendum, where only Latvian was recognised the official language of the country, a very small number of participants in protest rallies, as well as studies showing that 67% of Latvia’s minority representatives feel that they are closely or very closely related to Latvia [14]. Today’s researchers point out that during the process of cultural learning an individual socialises within a national culture without excluding the preservation of ethnic cultural identity. In view of this thesis, can conclude that the education reform offers a consistent solution for the introduction of the national cultural policy (including the official language policy) in the education system, when national security would be guaranteed, the role of the Latvian language strengthened, cultural diversity in the learning process ensured and new opportunities for ethnic minorities to successfully integrate into Latvia’s socio-economic environment provided.

The planned changes to the education system are directly related to cultural education and identity issues. The introduction of the education reform strengthens the role of the Latvian culture at national level and facilitates belonging of ethnic minorities to the country. Today, a situation has arisen where graduates of ethnic minority schools have difficulties to successfully obtain vocational and higher education available primarily in Latvian. The planned changes to the education system will promote belonging of graduates of ethnic minority schools to the state of Latvia and their integration. These changes, probably, will also affect cultural identity of Latvia’s population in the long run, contributing to development of the hybrid/multiple identity in Latvia as minority representatives will have an opportunity to deepen their knowledge of the Latvian language and culture, while preserving peculiarities of their ethnic culture.

3.4 Education Reform: Competence Approach and Cultural Literacy

An important issue of the education policy debate, both at national and EU levels, is the adaptation of the European education and training system to the needs of today’s economy and society. In order to overcome the effects of the economic and financial crisis, skills promoting growth and prosperity have been recognised as particularly important.

Although the above mentioned eight key competences cover all areas, the important role of natural science in education is highlighted in the Recommendation 2006/962/EC (Recommendation 2006/962/EC of the European Parliament and the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning, 2006), so that young people can acquire professions most required in the labour market. The European Commission’s reports highlight that the most important tasks of modern education are:

- To improve the poor reading skills of students and their achievements in mathematics and science;
- To promote integration of cross-sectoral skills in teaching and learning (e.g. ICT, business and social skills);
- To encourage more young people to choose a profession in the fields of mathematics, science and technology, since the adequacy of the number of graduates in these highly demanded areas is an extremely important factor for innovation and growth [1], [2].

The ideas highlighted in policy documents at European level are being implemented in Latvia by introducing the competence approach as part of the education reform. The existing curricula at basic and secondary levels offer relatively many opportunities to acquire knowledge of culture in different forms. The requirements, objectives and tasks defined in the curricula have been developed throughout many years and are based on established traditions [14]. Today’s approach to cultural education at school is linked to the times of the first awakening (1850 - 1880), when a great deal of attention was paid to national values (language, cultural development of the nation, national identity and preservation of cultural heritage, etc.). Later, during the first period of Latvian independence (1918-1940), an important contribution was made to cultural education, both by introducing culture-related subjects in general education and by creating music and arts schools. During the Soviet period, cultural literacy had an important role, too. Although cultural education during that period was highly ideologised, it was, in its essence, “deep, thorough, unhurried” [15]. The basic principles of the educational system established during the Soviet period – the breakdown in subjects, the importance of knowing facts and the teaching process conducted by the teacher – have remained to date. Experts point out that culture has been playing an important role in this learning system, but there are also shortcomings, namely – culture is taught on the basis of the traditions of individual sciences (which are
reflected in the names of the subjects), thus, students acquire deep knowledge in specific narrow cultural areas, do not recognise links between subjects, lack skills to use this knowledge in life.

The new basic education curriculum pays increased attention to the development of the fields of science and mathematics, which contributes to a reduction of the number of lessons for subjects related to culture. In October and November 2018, one of the most discussed issues in the public debate was the reduced number of lessons in literature. Teachers of higher education establishments, the Writers’ Union and the Latvian Association of Language and Literature Teachers wrote protest letters and called on the Saeima not to adopt the new education curriculum. It was noted that reading develops children’s thinking, their ability to critically and independently assess situations, as well as their ability to express themselves and to justify their views [16]. Therefore, the issue of reducing the number of lessons in literature is regarded not only as a matter of education content but also as a matter defining the future of the state of Latvia. It is noted that literature develops speech and writing skills, critical thinking, national memory and self-esteem of each person [7].

The ongoing debate shows that the public has not been fully informed about the strategy and specificities of the introduction of the new education content. The purpose of the new content is to educate a fully developed and skilled pupil who is interested in his/her intellectual, social and physical development, learns with pleasure and interest, demonstrates public participation in a socially responsible way and takes initiative, and is a patriot of Latvia. Critics of the new education content also consider that it is important to raise a thinking, intellectually developed individual who would respect and know the culture of his/her own nation [16]. It is obvious that the goals of the authors of the new curriculum and its critics are similar, but there is a different approaches to reach these goals. A large part of society does not trust education and cultural policy makers, indicating that the proposed reforms will not deliver the expected outcome. There are various reasons for this mistrust. Firstly, the new learning content is not sufficiently detailed, specific details of its implementation are not clear for the large part of society, including teachers. Secondly, the public has not been sufficiently informed about the characteristics and objectives of the new learning content. The draft of the new curriculum foresees more freedom in the field of cultural literacy education than the existing curricula. It describes the content of general training in cultural subjects, considering the links between students’ knowledge and current social development trends, such as multiculturalism, European identity, diversity, etc. In the existing curricula, this information is either described in a very fragmented way or not mentioned at all. The existing curricula contain very specific information about the requirements that a student needs to know when learning a specific subject.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The thematic analysis of curricula, provides an opportunity to analyse how “cultural heritage”, “cultural knowledge” and “participation” are reflected in the Latvian curricula that manage the educational process. Cultural education plays a relatively prominent part in Latvia’s education system. However, the link between the Latvian culture/identity and the European culture/identity is insufficiently reflected, notwithstanding the fact that various subjects focus on the European culture in its diverse manifestations. The focus of cultural education on the Latvian language and the preservation of the Latvian cultural heritage is driven by peculiarities of development of the state of Latvia. In this context, representatives of ethnic minorities living in Latvia play an important role. Special curricula are developed for them offering to acquire their native language and culture, as well as to get to grips with the Latvian language and culture at schools. Latvia’s cultural policy and curricula send a message that peculiarities of Latvia’s culture (both culture of ethnic Latvians and ethnic minority cultures) forge European cultural identity and are its integral part. Thus, the European cultural identity is seen as a concept consisting of identities of all European peoples.

The most important focus of today’s Latvian education system is the education reform whose development and implementation started in 2016 and will last until 2022. The need for the reform was driven by shortcomings identified in education; they were analysed at international and national levels. Politicians point out that today, both in Latvia and elsewhere in the world, understanding of what knowledge and skills will be necessary in future society is changing therefore the education content needs to be reviewed.

The education reform affects ethnic minority school curricula. A gradual transition to Latvian as the language of instruction will be introduced in the above schools. Thus, the number of lessons devoted to the acquisition of the respective ethnic minority language and culture will be reduced. The most important arguments favouring these changes are: 1) ensuring equal opportunities for future studies
for all pupils and 2) strengthening the importance of the Latvian language among Latvia’s population. Strengthening the role of Latvian in the country could contribute to successful integration of ethnic minorities in the Latvian education system and the labour market.

The new curriculum is expected to offer pupils a learning experience that will enable them to use their knowledge and skills, based on values, to address problems in changing, real-life situations. The role of the teacher will also change. He/she will no longer be a knowledge provider but a manager of the learning process who, using well-developed content and approach, will lead pupils to the answers they need instead of providing them with ready-made answers. Although cultural education in Latvia is deep-rooted, and politicians and researchers believe that it is fundamental and deep, it also has its drawbacks (e.g. the traditional obsolete learning methods, the lack of creativity and pupils’ involvement, etc.). The education reform also has a significant impact on subjects dealing with culture, i.e. the number of lessons devoted to these topics has been reduced in favour of natural sciences, the number of sports lessons has been increased; sports can be considered part of culture – physical culture. These changes trigger public protests and are discussed at the level of competent authorities.

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