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# MUSIC EDUCATION SUPPORTING ESTONIAN BASIC SCHOOL STUDENTS' COLLECTIVE IDENTITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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## Abstract

Estonian multiculturalism concept requires public socio-cultural space. Different culture groups' successful communication results in collective identity. Music, with musical thinking as its action mechanism, supports basic school students' collective identity. The research question is - what are the opportunities provided by the effect of music education on the development of basic school students' collective identity? This study aimed to find out about the effect of music education on the development of basic school students' collective identity. The focus was on the potential of music textbooks to support collective identity of the students of forms 8 to 9 of Estonian and Russian medium schools. The research methods applied are content analysis and the image reading method. The research results allow us to conclude that basic school music education textbooks contain a sufficient amount of varied and instructive information to create preconditions – and a basis for the education and development of students with a qualitatively new personality – with high level of ethnic and social consciousness, empathy, and a strong spirit of Estonian citizenship or collective identity.

*Keywords:* Collective identity, music education

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## **1. Introduction**

The multiculturalism concept of the Estonian state was born out of the social need to recognise and respect society's cultural diversity. Indeed, multiculturalism requires public socio-cultural space in which groups bearing different cultures can interact and communicate. Shaping positive national self-consciousness is one of the priorities of the education system of Estonia, requiring construction of the Estonian identity so that it would not conflict with the historically developed numerous (nearly a third of the population) Russian-speaking diaspora.

According to the sociologist Benedict Anderson (2006, 46), the boundaries of a nation-state are not the same as the boundaries of the area where the indigenous language is spoken; similarly, in the context of this study, the Estonian state does not automatically mean the use of the Estonian language. Successful communication between nationalities can result in the indigenous population and the diaspora being able to develop a common collective identity.

A part of Estonian education system is an established tradition of music education, which is the basis for the compulsory music instruction for children at national level, from preschool age through to the end of upper- secondary school, i.e. from 3 to 18 years of age (Muldma & Kiilu 2009).

The article is based on a study which aimed to find information that creates a potential basis for the development of students' collective identity in the music textbooks for grades 7 to 9 of Estonian and Russian medium schools. The research methods applied were content analysis and the image reading method.

## **2. Theoretical background**

Anderson (2006) argues that nationalities are illusory and imagined communities created to mobilise society and achieve unity. Such approach challenges the existenti-ality of nationalities, which Anderson views as artificially constructed. The perception of national unity is an outcome of ideological activity and thus not only national identity but any collective identity is communicative in nature and therefore constructivist.

Collective identity develops as a result of communication, which is why in its development an extremely important role belongs to social structures and institutions whose mission is to create and communicate information. Education system, especially general education school, is the largest national institution whose activity directly influences the formation of national identity and its continuity and has a strong impact on the citizenship perception of the society as a whole (Anderson, 2006; Gustavsson, 2000).

Much attention has recently been paid to the identity development role of the Estonian education system. The post-modern world also affects the priorities of Estonian education and educational policy. Today's students of Estonian and Russian medium schools are members of the future Estonian society, which is why it is important to introduce some changes in the traditional organisation of education and find new ways and opportunities for bringing together members of the two communities. One such method is students' collective identity, in the formation of which music instruction has its role. The aforesaid is supported by the view of Wilfrid Gruhn (2011) that music education as a part of the system of general education has a strong social dimension and is therefore a reliable reflection of the social, political and socio-cultural spheres of the society (p. 55).

Claude Levi-Strauss (2000) suggests that music as a language of communication has an ability to appear as a possible equivalent of feelings, emotions and moods while being understood by the majority of people (p. 68). To simplify communication, Estonian cultural semiotician Juri Lotman (2006) recommends using a metalanguage, i.e. a language used to learn and explain other languages to help to understand each other (p. 110). Thus, music allows finding new ways of developing students' collective identity in the modern multicultural society.

The authors of this article rely on Lotman's [Лотман] (2010) opinion that "the cultural world of a nationality is not unique in itself but in relation to another culture, because singularity or uniqueness can only be defined in relation to a fixed frame of reference. Therefore, collective identity can only emerge if another person, another national culture is seen as an equal partner whose completely distinct conception of life allows differing but at the same time requires respect" (p. 47).

In keeping with the views of Tarasti (1990), Cox (2011), Sloboda (2000), Pääs (2010) and many others who treat music as a socio-cultural form of consciousness, the authors of the article are interested in applying music as a means of communication in the process of the development of collective identity. According to the results of a jointly conducted study, Finnish and Estonian music pedagogues found many similar features in the music education of the two countries. Music education in both countries relies on the roots of their national culture and attaches value to folk traditions. However, differences occur in the recognition of the music culture of the world, with Estonian results being somewhat poorer than the Finnish. The researchers found that music education is an important subject in the development of tolerance, since on the one hand, music allows drawing attention to differences, and on the other hand, it helps to tolerate these differences. Music education has

also an impact on the formation of social cohesion in the form of collective identity (Sepp, Ruokonen, & Ruismäki 2012, Ruokonen & Muldma 2007).

In the context of this study the means of formation of collective identity is music education, one of its mechanisms of action being musical thinking, i.e. a socio-cultural phenomenon that is shaped and developed through musical-emotional experience. Musical thinking is viewed as a complex, emotions-based sensory- intellectual process aiming to recognise and assess works of music, which is considered one of the most important impact factors in music education (Tarassova [Tapaccoba], 1988).

Musical thinking is viewed in relation to changes in the development of social relations and a person's place in the society. At the societal level musical thinking reflects society's tastes, preferences, ideals, artistic-ethical and moral-ethical positions. The process of musical thinking consists in the ability to analyse and synthesise musical material and find associations between emotional reaction and music content. Designing and guiding this process promotes emotional sense of belonging in socio-cultural groups, the creation of a common cultural space (Muldma & Nõmm 2011, pp. 43-44).

### **3. Research Questions and Methods**

In the school system, students' education and intercultural relations rely on music learning literature. Therefore, the research focuses on the question: to which socio-cultural sphere of influence do music textbooks' topic-related texts and relevant song repertoire, illustrations and the selection of works of music place students of grades 7 to 9? The research relies on the analysis of the music learning literature (music textbooks and workbooks) used in Estonian and Russian medium schools in Estonia.

To investigate music learning literature as a whole, the methods of content analysis and image reading were used. One of the general conceptual foundations of music education is the extent of the approach: music education is interpreted as a socio-cultural opportunity to develop students' collective identity with established value attitudes, and not merely as a school subject that is oriented towards the acquisition of musical skills.

While developing instruments and categories for the study, Schwartz's and Bilsky (1990) and Inglehart's (1995) value clusters were used. The basic categories of this study aim to define the possible prerequisites for shaping collective identity.

Two categories were used to analyse music learning literature:

**Social activity**, the two clusters of which are the following:

№ 1. Public spirit, acceptance of differences, communication and cooperation skills;

№ 2. Recognition of the traditions of different national cultures;

**Common values**, the three clusters that were chosen were

№ 1. Home/family, mother tongue, culture as a value;

№ 2. Positive self-image and intrinsic values (fairness, honesty, human dignity, empathy, respect for self and others);

№ 3. Common cultural space.

In the context of this study a common cultural space means universal musical-theoretical knowledge: musical means of expression (melody, rhythm, tempo, scale, dynamics, timber, harmony); types of music genres (vocal and instrumental music, structure of musical works); musical instruments (string, keyboard, percussion and wind instruments); common song repertoire; a selection of well-known classical, jazz and pop music hits.

For the content analysis the music learning literature was divided into three investigation groups: the treatment of topics/texts and song repertoire; illustrations (photographs, paintings, pictures) and musical works for listening. Being aware that selection of musical works reflects certain more general educational attitudes, this study sees as an important part of music instruction the familiarisation of students with the wealth of world's music through the listening process, the functioning mechanism of which is musical thinking.

The image reading method was chosen on the basis of Paul Ricœur's hermeneutic concept, which views understanding of signs and symbols as the art of interpretation and argues that any understanding takes place through associating texts, signs and symbols (Ricœur, 2008). The German researcher and writer of textbooks Gerhard Maletzke (1996; 1998). also suggests that post-industrial society is characterised by an increasing role of all symbols and signs with semiotic meaning, which results in the domination of visual culture. This means that in mass communication the phenomenon of communicative code is continuously growing. Image building takes place through presenting textual content as well as pictures/photographs (Maletzke, 1996; 1998). The authors of this article think that the trends mentioned by the above researchers have also influenced music learning literature in Estonia in recent years. Therefore, beside the content analysis research method the authors have chosen to use the image reading method.

#### **4. Findings**

The results of the analysis of 12 music textbooks (Karp [Карп] & Muldma, 2008; Muldma [Мулдма] & Sjomina, 2010a, 2012a; Sepp, Skuin, & Sepp, 2006; Skuin & Sepp, 2009; Skuin, Sepp, Ojakäär, & Sepp, 2007) and workbooks (Muldma, [Мулдма], 2008; Muldma, [Мулдма] & Sjomina, 2010b, 2012b; Sepp, Skuin, & Sepp 2007; Skuin & Sepp,

2007; 2012) carried out by means of content analysis and the image reading method are given in the two tables below where for the purpose of generalization the occurrence frequencies of the characteristics of grades 7, 8 and 9 have been given as sums.

**Table 1.** Frequencies of occurrence of characteristics of social activity

Cluster		Topics / texts	Illustrations	Works of music
		Grades 7 to 9	Grades 7 to 9	Grades 7 to 9
№ 1. Public spirit, acceptance of differences, communication and cooperation skills	E	103	76	62
	R	206	106	58
№ 2. Recognition of the traditions of different national cultures	E	98	143	46
	R	96	177	50
Total of occurrence frequencies	E	201	219	128
	R	302	183	108

The analysis of social activity (Table 1) allows us to conclude that characteristics in cluster № 1 occur twice more often in the topics/texts of music learning literature of Russian medium schools (E-103 and R-206). Here and hereafter E indicates Estonian medium schools and R Russian medium schools' learning literature. The frequency of information presented in the form of illustrations is also higher by a quarter (E-76 and R-106) and works of music offered for listening score relatively similarly (E-62 and R-58). In the context of developing collective identity the received result may be considered both positive and predictable, since students of Russian diaspora require more attention and support in growing into Estonian citizens.

Considerably more balance can be observed in the results of cluster № 2: information about recognition of the traditions of different national cultures occurs on a significantly large scale, especially in the categories of topics/texts (E-98 and R-96) and selection of works of music (E-46 and R-50). The analysis of the study literature from the point of listening to works of music by grades reveals that the development of social activity is most supported by the material for grade 8, where the occurrence frequencies are by two thirds higher in Russian medium schools than in Estonian medium schools. Unfortunately, the learning materials for grade 9 of Russian medium schools do not contain any examples of listening to works of music.

Cluster № 2 shows the significantly higher occurrence of illustrations in the learning materials of Russian medium schools (E-143 and R-177). The occurrence of visual information in music learning materials can generally be considered remarkably high. To sum up the recognition of the traditions of different national cultures, it can be concluded that the information in learning materials strongly supports the formation and development

of students' social activity. In case of Russian medium schools, visual information appears to be more substantial.

The analysis of the next basic category common values was carried out on the basis of three clusters (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Frequencies of occurrence of characteristics of common values

Cluster	Topics / texts		Illustrations	Works of music
	Grades 7 to 9		Grades 7 to 9	Grades 7 to 9
№ 1. Home/family, mother tongue, culture as a value	E	93	35	20
	R	107	56	20
№ 2. Positive self-image and intrinsic values (fairness, honesty, human dignity, empathy, respect for self and others)	E	156	25	58
	R	163	28	46
№ 3. Common cultural space	E	180	289	182
	R	350	226	157
Total of occurrence frequencies	E	429	349	260
	R	620	310	223

The learning material which aims to develop students' common values contains equally large amounts of information that supports cluster № 1 in the group of topics/texts (E-93 and R-107). However, occurrence frequencies of illustrations are much lower (E-35 and R-56) and the selection of works of music constitutes only a quarter of the frequency of the group of topics/texts (E-20 and R-20). These results can also be viewed as positive, taking into account the age of the contingent studied (14 to 16), when alongside with pictures and music also the information provided by the text becomes important.

In cluster № 2 – students' positive self-image and intrinsic values – again the amount of information in the topics/texts group rises to the fore (E-156 and R-163), the selection of works of music being considerably lower (E- 58 and R-46) and the occurrence of visual material very poorly represented (E-25 and R-28). The results of the data analysis allow us to conclude that music education helps students to develop their explicit and implicit self-image. The first of them is rational and is constructed on the basis of cultural competence (education, music history, traditions/rituals), which also includes national identity. At the same time, the second, implicit self-concept is irrational (feelings, emotions), which are constructed on the basis of emotional associations of proximal zone (relationships, symbols) (Vygotsky [Выготский], 2005). Both identities are equally necessary for the formation of collective identity. The occurrence frequencies regarding the formation of cluster № 3 – common cultural space – increase exceptionally in comparison to the above described clusters. Even given high characteristics the amount of topics/texts of Russian medium

schools exceeds those of Estonian medium schools almost by half (E-180 and R- 350). However, in the two following groups: illustrations (E-289 and R-226) and selection of musical works for listening (E-182 and R-157) more information is offered to the students of Estonian medium schools.

Considering the volume of information given, it can be safely concluded that the music learning materials provide students of grades 7 to 9 of Estonian and Russian medium schools with a firm basis for gaining familiarity with cultural traditions of their own and other nations.

## **5. Conclusions**

The results of this study allow us to conclude that music learning materials hold great potential through which it is possible to significantly influence the readiness of students of Estonian and Russian medium schools for the construction of their collective identity.

As music education is oriented towards tolerance, cooperation and mutual understanding, one of the opportunities for developing students' collective identity is offered by practical musical activities, among which singing and listening to music have greatest impact. Music generates the development of musical thinking necessary for understanding the second "self" and therefore students may adopt as mutual language of interaction the musical creation of the dialogical "self", which requires as necessary skills not only speaking/singing but also listening.

Based on scientific-pedagogical sources and the results of the research conducted, we may argue that it is possible to influence mutual understanding and communication between different cultures through topic-based learning texts, song repertoire, illustrations and familiarisation with works of music, which, as a whole, and including its components, is oriented towards the development of collective identity through empathy, cooperation and mutual understanding.

A comparative analysis of the study results revealed that music learning literature contains sufficiently versatile and informative data, which creates a basis and preconditions for educating students with new personal qualities – high ethnic and social awareness, empathy and Estonian citizenship values. At the same time, the authors realise that while being a positive process, the development of collective identity is also a time-consuming and complex activity, which depends on many component factors, such as values, radical acknowledgement of cultural differences, educational priorities, etc. Dealing with collective identity, being a relatively new issue for today's Estonian society, is likely become a focus of interest for many countries.



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