Socially Intelligent Intercultural Education

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In this article the concept of social intelligence in intercultural education classes was explored as it can contribute toward forming a more tolerant and sustainable society. Specifically, a qualitative research study was conducted with 74 preservice first-year Latvia university students (emerging teachers) and 25 master-level in-service students (teachers and social workers). The aim was to discover students' understanding of social intelligence and its applicability for lessening ethnic tensions and forming positive relationships in a multicultural environment. Guided small-group discussions were facilitated, and the written responses received from the participants of discussion groups were summarized and analyzed. Participant response trends indicated that most of the student suggestions about how to diminish ethnic tensions in their surroundings were action-oriented and closely linked to skills and competences related to social intelligence. It also revealed the need for educators to consider how to promote through the teaching process such qualities as tolerance, respect,

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kindness, care and empathy, which are essential for successful social and intercultural interactions. Implications for practice are briefly discussed.

Keywords: social intelligence; intercultural education; empathy

Although the presence of races, ethnical backgrounds, and cultures vary in different countries, we live in a multicultural world and teach in multicultural classrooms. As Schmidt (2007) stated, globalization is rapidly breaking down our vision of a world with well-defined national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries (p. xiii), therefore learning to live together in this diverse world requires both from teachers and students acquiring positive thinking, tolerant attitudes and also dealing with stereotypes and emotions we have toward other people often influenced by painful turns of history.

Goleman (2006) in the beginning of his book *Social Intelligence* asked some deeply philosophical questions: Can we do a better job of helping our children to grow up to be happy? What helps groups driven by hatred come to live together in peace? What kind of society are we able to build? What really matters in each of our lives? (pp. 5–6). Although there are probably no straightforward answers, it is possible to sense the author's intention to emphasize social interactions and relationships. I find these questions appropriate for discussions also in intercultural education classes, as they help to touch on some aspects that are essential for human life but not emphasized enough in educational curricula.

One of the chapters of Buber's (1958) famous book *I and Thou* ends with the words: "All real living is meeting" (p. 11). I also believe that life is about relationships — with people, with God (or Divine), with the world around us. Relationships shape personalities; through relationships people learn to love, care, forgive, communicate, and find meaning for their lives. Living undoubtedly is about meeting. What else can it be?

American psychologist Virginia Satir described communication as a huge umbrella that covers and affects all that happens between human beings:

> Once a human being has arrived on this earth, communication is a largest single factor determining what kind of relationships he or she makes with others and what happens to each in the world. How we manage survival, how we develop intimacy, how productive we are, how we make sense, how we connect with our own divinity — all depend largely on our communication skills. (Satir, 1988, p. 51)

Living as meeting is an art that needs to be practiced on a daily basis, and it is difficult to be in *I-Thou* relationships without employing basic social intelligence skills such as empathy, forgiveness, compassion, and care in order to reach peace and harmony within oneself and the world around.

The cultural context of Latvia where I come from and where I teach is not so colorful in terms of ethnic or religious backgrounds, but diverse enough to face problems initiated by ethnic, cultural, and social issues. Although population in Latvia is predominantly white and Christian,[1] many people hold lots of negative feelings toward other nations due to historical heritage as for many centuries the territory of Latvia has been desired by different more powerful countries — Germany, Poland, Sweden, Tsarist, and Soviet Russia. Especially the most recent 50 years under Soviet Union have left painful scars in the collective memory of Latvia and its people, also creating ethnic tensions on political and personal levels. The Soviet policy was to artificially mix people from different nations and ethnic groups forcing Russian as a main language for communication, thus creating a big Soviet nation without any concern about other languages and cultures.

In order to coexist and respect other cultures, tolerance, human rights, and multiculturalism have been declared as significant values of the 21st century (Izglītības Attīstības Centrs, 2011), and educators are faced with the difficult task to enliven these values into lived experiences. Exploring the concept of social intelligence as an important

factor for educating culturally proficient people can contribute toward forming a tolerant and sustainable society.

The Essence of Intercultural Education

Intercultural education starts with understanding of culture. Loveland (2010) viewed culture as oxygen that sustains life, saying that only when deprived of oxygen or usual cultural supports, people realize how crucial both are to their existence. The author stressed the fact that culture is learned, not biologically inherited — any human infant can learn any culture through the process of socialization. Cultures, like people, develop and change in response to the environment and conditions present in particular time and space. Loveland argued that "[c]ultural variables are woven into an intricate tapestry — pull one thread or change one color of the tapestry and the composition of the entire picture may be altered" (p. 21). Therefore, it is unrealistic to ask people to change an aspect of their cultures without recognizing that this may change or alter other learned values or behaviors.

According to Banks (1997), an important goal of multicultural education is to improve race relations and to help all students acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed for participation in cross-cultural interactions making the world more democratic and just (p. vii). Banks called multicultural education as education for freedom in three important senses: it enables the students to freely affirm their ethnic, racial, and cultural identities; provides students with the freedom to function beyond their ethnic and cultural boundaries; and helps students to develop the commitment and skills needed to participate in personal, social, and civic action (p. 26).

Byram, Nichols, and Stevens (2001), in the introduction of the book *Developing Intercultural Competence in Practice*, also mentioned knowledge, attitudes,[2] and skills as the main components of intercultural competence, saying that they must be complemented by the personal values one holds. According to the authors, intercultural competence also includes intercultural attitudes such as curiosity and openness,

readiness to evaluate beliefs about other cultures and also one's own, willingness to relativize one's own values, beliefs and behaviors without assuming that they are the only correct ones (p. 5).

Campinha-Bacote (2002) distinguished five interdependent constructs that are necessary for reaching cultural competence: (a) desire to become culturally competent (not because it is required); (b) cultural awareness (cultural sensitivity, self-examination); (c) cultural knowledge (learning worldviews of people); (d) cultural skills (ability to collect relevant cultural data); and (e) cultural encounter (direct experience from meeting people from different cultures) (pp. 182–183). Thus, individuals make a step toward cultural competence when they consciously analyze their own personal experiences and learn to understand the values and beliefs behind other people's behavior.

According to Dewey (1938), "all genuine education comes about through experience" (p. 25). I also believe that experience is crucial in the journey toward cultural competence. In the intercultural education class, students learn about implications of history, ethnical, and racial differences comparing and contrasting various theories, but it is the first-hand experience that takes one beyond the information, demands a change in attitude, and requires the application of acquired skills. The research team of the project "Culture of Tolerance in Latvia's Environment" suggested that in Latvia, people lack first-hand experiences with people from other cultures (Bērziņa, 2008, p. 11), as not too many cultures are represented in the public space of the country, particularly in the countryside.

Experience is also closely related to a reflective self-analysis. As educators bring their cultural perspectives, values, hopes, and dreams to the classrooms, they also bring their prejudices, positive and negative stereotypes, and misconceptions which need to be understood and analyzed (Banks, 1997). Self-reflection helps everybody to explore and clarify one's own beliefs and biases, and also empathic abilities in order to develop more positive attitudes toward different racial, ethnical, and cultural groups. Educators should make sure that in the learning process students are encouraged not only to analyze their values and empathic

abilities while constructing their own knowledge (Loveland, 2010, p. 29), but also to put their knowledge in practice when encountering that, which is different.

The importance of empathy in one's journey toward interpersonal and intercultural competence cannot be overstated (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2010, p. 389) as it is a fundament for engaging in healthy relationships. According to Hart (1999), most often empathy is defined as understanding and "'feeling into' another's world" (p. 113), but Hart (1999) himself characterized empathy in the following way:

> Most of us have noticed that, when we pay attention and are simply open to the person in front of us, we come closer to understanding his or her experience. This is simply enough, although easily forgotten when caught up in the hurry of daily activity. But when the opening does occur, there are sometimes moments when understanding of the other deepens beyond what I can easily explain. I seem to experience the other's feelings directly in my own body … (pp. 111–112)

Lake (2010) stressed the power of personal story and self-reflection for development of empathy, saying that: "If we are critically conscious, we will see ourselves in the story of others, which in turn enables us to see beyond external abstractions of humanity into the lived experience of others.… without self reflection, empathy is impossible" (p. 43). The next part of this article will explore the concept of social intelligence, which includes self-reflection and empathy, as the tool for achieving cultural competence.

Social Intelligence: Can it Help to Understand the Different?

For nearly 100 years, different authors and researchers[3] have been exploring the concept of social intelligence and its application in various settings employing also latest neuroscientific findings. Thorndike (1920) defined social intelligence as "the ability to understand and manage men and women" and "acting wisely in human relations" (p. 228). According

to research conducted by Dong, Koper, and Collaço (2008), for a long time the aspect of social intelligence has been associated with enhanced problem-solving abilities, experienced leadership, and positive emotional experiences (p. 163), stressing success in intercultural negotiations and business settings (see also Wawra, 2009). Goleman (2006) claimed that social intelligence goes beyond one person's psychology — it is what transpires as we connect or engage in a relationship, as the human brain is designed to be *sociable* and "we are wired to connect" (pp. 4–5). According to Goleman, social intelligence means "skills we all need to live well in the world," being intelligent in relations, looking beyond narrow self-interest to the best interests of others, enriching empathy and concern (pp. 11–12). Goleman's description of social intelligence is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Social Intelligence According to Goleman (2006)

Social Intelligence	
Social awareness:	• primal empathy (feeling with others, sensing nonverbal emotional signals; it improves with time) • attunement (listening with full receptivity, attuning to a person; can be enhanced by intentionally paying more attention) • empathic accuracy (understanding other person's thoughts, feelings, and intentions) • social cognition (knowing how the social world works; crucial for smooth interactions with people from different cultures*)
Social facility: (relationship management)	• synchrony (interacting smoothly at the nonverbal level; nonverbal dance with another person**) • self-presentation (presenting ourselves effectively; expressing oneself in a way that produces the desired social result — putting someone at ease) • influence (shaping the outcome of social interactions; success of getting people to comply) • concern (caring about others' needs and acting accordingly; taking responsibility; reflects a person's capacity for compassion)

* Someone can be bright at social cognition, but lacking the basics of social facility; he / she will still be painfully awkward with other people (Goleman, 2006, p. 91).

** Many people are poor at this ability and suffer from dyssemia — the deficit in reading nonverbal signs, often caused by not interacting enough with peers or when family did not display given range of emotions (Goleman, 2006, pp. 91–92).

Source: Adapted from Goleman (2006, pp. 84–94).

Albrecht (2006), the executive management consultant, futurist, and lecturer, defined social intelligence as "ability to get along well with others and to get them to cooperate with you" (p. 3). He used "S.P.A.C.E." formula to describe his understanding of social intelligence (see Table 2) and claimed that people can act in toxic and nourishing ways: a person with toxic behavior makes other people feel devalued, angry, frustrated or guilty, but with a nourishing one — valued, respected, affirmed, encouraged or competent. A continued pattern of toxic behavior indicates a low level of social intelligence — the inability to connect with people and influence them. A continued pattern of nourishing behavior, however, indicates a high social intelligence and makes those people who have this trait — effective in dealing with others. Toxic people are often too preoccupied with their own struggles that they simply are not able to see the impact they have on others and need help in seeing themselves as others see them. According to Albrecht, the biggest cause of low social intelligence is simply lack of insight (pp. 13–14).

Table 2: The "S.P.A.C.E." Formula

	"S.P.A.C.E." Formula
Behaviors	• Situational (or Social) Awareness: ability to observe and understand the context of a situation and how it shapes people's behavior
	• Presence: a total message one sends to others with his / her behavior
	• Authenticity: are the motives and behavior honest, ethical, and congruent with personal values
	• Clarity: ability to express ideas clearly, effectively, and with impact (includes listening, feedback, paraphrasing, semantic flexibility, skillful use of language, metaphors etc.)
	• Empathy: building connections, creating a mutual feeling between oneself and another person

Source: Adapted from Albrecht (2006).

Further, Albrecht (n.d.) is convinced that social intelligence skills can be learned as people grow up and mature. Unfortunately, many people do not continue to learn and grow as they age, therefore they never acquire the awareness and skills they need to succeed in social, business, or professional situations. Everyone can significantly improve

their social intelligence if they understand the basic concepts and assess themselves against a comprehensive model of interpersonal effectiveness.

Goleman (2006) stressed the importance of parenting in the development of social intelligence, saying that "raising an empathic child requires not just a necessary set of genes, but also sufficient parenting or other opt social experiences … only this combination ensures that the right genes will operate in the best way" (p. 151). Parenting cannot change every gene nor modify every neural tic, but the daily experiences of children sculpt their neural circuitry:

> The child's brain comes preprogramed to grow, but it takes a bit more than the first two decades of life to finish that task, making it the last organ of the body to become anatomically mature. Over that period all the major figures in a child's life — parents, siblings, grandparents, teachers, and friends — can become active ingredients in brain growth, creating a social and emotional mix that drives neural development. Like a plant adapting to rich or depleted soil, a child's brain shapes itself to fit its social ecology, particularly the emotional climate fostered by the main people in her life. (Goleman, 2006, p. 152)

Moreover, later in life emotions and even biology is being driven and molded by other people. Goleman (2006) compared negative emotions with a second-hand smoke, saying that everybody can consciously make other people feel better or much better, or worse — or a lot worse, and that "the leakage of emotions can make a bystander an innocent casualty of someone else's toxic state" (pp. 12–14).

Another aspect why people so often get stuck in relationships is inability to forgive. Research indicates that forgiveness is not only related to health outcomes, such as lowering blood pressure, heart rate and levels of stress hormones, and lessening pain and depression, but also that people who are forgiving tend to have more social support and better relationship skills (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Forgiveness does not require forgetting what has happened or total reconciliation. It means "finding a way to free oneself from the claws of obsession about

the hurt" (Goleman, 2006, p. 308), which brings inner freedom so often needed in all levels of social and interpersonal interaction.

There can be significant differences in how people from different cultures communicate empathy, show concern, or use their body language. For example, according to Alred (2003), Americans show empathy through articulation and expression, but Asians nonverbally or as heart-to-heart communication when direct expressions of empathy can be considered as impolite. Also, as Roland described, Asian women have dozens of different kinds of silences when they communicate (cited in Alred, 2003, p. 21). Germans are taught to be serious and credible when communicating, but in British culture emphasis is placed first on relationships than business, therefore more relaxed body postures can be taken (Schmidt, 2007, p. 81). Wawra (2009) drew attention to the fact that in most European and North American cultures, people are used to direct mode of communication, and usually are not well trained in interpreting nonverbal and emotional clues during their communication (p. 167), which can be attributed also to Latvian culture. Latvians are sometimes characterized as people that are slow to warm to strangers and from which it is hard to extract smiles (Lewis, 2008, p. 76), but it does not mean that Latvians are largely unfriendly. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that the manifestations of social intelligence are culturally sensitive and cannot be generalized across cultures: the behaviors and characteristics that one culture considers socially intelligent are not necessarily deemed socially intelligent by others (Dong et al., 2008, p. 165).

Students' Opinions

In order to discover students' understanding of social intelligence and its applicability for lessening ethnic tensions and forming positive relationships in a multicultural environment, 74 preservice first-year students and 25 master-level in-service students (12 teachers and 13 social workers) of Liepaja University were asked to engage in small-group discussions (3 to 5 students) during the study courses Intercultural

Education and Social Work in Multicultural Environment. The students were asked to express their thoughts and experience at the same time listening to the views of other students. The small-group discussion research method was chosen because it not only provides answers to specific questions, but also encourages students to organize their thinking by comparing ideas and interpretations and to give expression of their own thoughts, and enhances students' ability to communicate, listen and argue their own opinions (see Jaques, 2011).

Discussing the question "Are there any ethnic tensions in your surroundings/at your workplace and how these ethnic tensions could be diminished?", most of the students ($n = 85$) mentioned tensions between Latvian and Russian communities (reasons: history, state politics, Russians not wanting to learn Latvian, Russians feeling discriminated), but a few students ($n = 5$) mentioned tensions between Latvians and Roma (reasons: stereotypes, mistrust and bad experiences). Three students have observed bad attitude or inadequate behavior toward black people, naming reasons such as cultural differences, lack of knowledge, and fear of the unknown. Only 9 in-service social workers acknowledged they have not experienced any ethnic tensions in their work place. Quite a large group of students ($n = 28$) admitted that Latvia has a potential for ethnic conflicts, also saying that if these tensions are not attended to, they can easily grow into feelings of hatred.

Suggesting how ethnic tensions could be diminished, students emphasized the following aspects:

- *Role of education* ("there is a need to study the history and create joint understanding about historical events, finding common goals and common basic values"; "children need to be educated already from very early age about other cultures"; "children must learn how to treat *all* people with respect"; "we must learn how to live in a multicultural environment and how to see the 'different' as a value"; "we must learn and understand our own values first to be able to understand other cultures");

- *Communication skills* ("we all need to improve our listening skills and engage in dialogue"; "we need to employ mutually enriching communication to be able to exchange ideas respectfully and explain different trends of thought");
- *Self-development* ("we need to become more tolerant, respectful and able to share as first of all we are people, but only then representatives of a particular culture"; "people must cease looking at other nations as a threat"; "we must stop living in the past without looking into future"; "people must devote more time trying to understand the causes of ethnic tensions"; "it is important to change the pattern of thinking and acting as we talk a lot about tolerance, peace and mutual understanding, but nothing changes"; "it is important to know — who I am and where I come from; then the next step is the desire to meet other people");
- *First-hand experience* ("there is a need for more extensive traveling in order to get acquainted with other cultures and learn from people with different worldviews");
- *Social activities and state policy* ("social activities should be organized introducing other nations to Latvian culture and our national heritage, at the same time Latvians could learn about other cultures"; "the state policy should be inclusive and oriented toward social integration — not toward money and power").

Some students commented that these ethnic tensions cannot be eliminated easily as they have formed during a long period of time; we must wait for a change of generations. But as it can be noticed, most of the suggestions are action-oriented and many of them also closely linked to skills and competences related to social intelligence (see the point on self-development).

On the question "How would you characterize a socially intelligent person?", the most frequently mentioned characteristics were that a socially intelligent person is: educated and erudite ($n = 38$); kind and polite ($n = 30$); socially active ($n = 23$); with good communication and listening skills ($n = 21$); tolerant and respectful ($n = 18$); empathetic

(n = 14); knowledgeable and experienced in various matters (n = 11); emotionally intelligent (n = 5). Many of these answers correspond with the responses on the next question: What kind of society do you desire? Students desire a society that is: positive and optimistic (n = 32); educated (n = 25); tolerant, respectful, and without prejudices (n = 19); kind, friendly, and polite (n = 12); socially and emotionally intelligent (n = 12); loving and caring (n = 10); helpful and supportive (n = 10); prosperous and economically stable (n = 9); and also compassionate and empathetic (n = 6).

These findings showed that portraying the society in which they would like to live and work, the students were again indirectly pointing at qualities that match with the different aspects of social intelligence. There is a lot to strive for, as the world we live in is quite far from being positive, tolerant, respectful, kind, friendly, caring, and empathetic. Therefore, it is a challenge for educators to consider how to promote these qualities through the teaching process, at the same time emphasizing listening skills and body-language literacy, which are essential for successful social and intercultural interactions.

Discussion and Conclusions

Several authors continue to debate whether intercultural understanding is possible at all as all humans are determined by their own categories and interests. For example, Harden (cited in Bredella, 2003, p. 31) suggested that outsiders, no matter how they might try, will never fully understand others and will never be fully understood by others. Bredella (2003) indicated that people's minds are flexible enough to learn new things and reconstruct different frames of reference. When people disconnect themselves from their own categories, values, and interests, it becomes possible to construct the context of the foreign, take the other people's perspective, and see things through their eyes. Humans are able to empathize, feel compassion, fear or other emotions when watching a film or hearing a story, therefore also they are able to understand inexperienced things within certain limitations. Bredella recommended

creating a flexible model of intercultural understanding which would allow to mediate between relativism and ethnocentrism and to develop a third position which transcends the values of foreign and people's own cultures, helping learners to develop empathy and mutual understanding (p. 47).

Szecsi, Spillman, Vázquez-Montilla, and Mayberry (2010) suggested that not always students, even within teacher education programs, are endowed with the desired attitudes and wisdom that allow them to embrace diversity and culturally inclusive attitudes, thus they need guidance from the teacher education faculty (p. 44). Teachers/academics must be prepared to provide this support. Likewise, pupils cannot be expected to develop sensitivity or empathy toward others merely because they are told so. It is important to create grounds for sharing in the lives of others, which can also provide an avenue for multicultural understanding (Wham, Barnhart, & Cook, 1996, p. 2). I agree with Albrecht who argued that social intelligence should be a developmental priority in early education, public schooling, and also adult learning processes:

> Children and teenagers need to learn to win the fellowship and respect they crave. College students need to learn to collaborate and influence others effectively. Managers need to understand and connect with the people they're appointed to lead. High-tech professionals … need to understand the social context and achieve their objectives by working from empathy. All adults, in their careers and personal lives, need to be able to present themselves effectively and earn the respect of those they deal with. Social intelligence can reduce conflict, create collaboration, replace bigotry and polarization with understanding, and mobilize people toward common goals. Indeed, it may be — in the long run — the most important ingredient in our survival as a species. (Albrecht, n.d., "A Learnable Skill," para. 1)

Hart (2009) described six interrelated layers of knowing and learning: information, knowledge, intelligence, understanding, wisdom, and transformation. He called information a currency of education needed to move forward. Employing stories and metaphors in the

process of education helps to turn information into knowledge. Intelligence cuts, dismantles and reconstructs the questions, but wisdom sees beyond what is visible, supporting evolution and growth. The heart of understanding is cultivated through empathy, appreciation, openness, service, listening, and loving presence. All this is a process of transformation. According to Hart (2009), education for transformation provides liberating habits and tools that include strength of will, clarity of mind, compassion of heart, and power of critical dialogue — so needed also for forming intercultural relationships.

Sternberg and Kaufman (2011) suggested that it is possible that the concept of social intelligence has outlived its usefulness and will be supplanted by emotional intelligence, but also it is possible that neuroscientific analyses will give new life to the study of social intelligence, as they promise to do in other areas of psychology (p. 577). Whatever is the case, without stressing the basic principles of social intelligence (even if it is referred to using a different term), intercultural education can hardly become transformative. Therefore, schools/ universities should work harder in finding ways to assist pupils in transforming acquired information on ethnical, cultural, and social issues into practiced values in order to avoid *social corrosion* (Goleman, 2006, p. 6), which is pervasive and often leads to indifference and ignorance. Examining our own attitudes and emphasizing empathy, care, forgiveness, and concern for other people in our educational programs can contribute toward creating socially intelligent communities and sustainability of the world around us.

Notes

1. Latvians 59.3%, Russians 27.8%, Belarussians 3.6%, Ukrainians 2.5%, Polish 2.4%, Lithuanians 1.3%, others 3.1% (IndexMundi, 2013); from them: Lutherans 34.2%, Catholics 24.1%, Eastern Orthodox 17.8%, Old Believers 1.2%, other Christians 1.2%, other religions and nonbelievers 21.1% — mostly unbelievers as according to provisional data of Latvia Ministry of Justice ("Ziņojums," 2012); in Latvia there are 340 Muslims,

158 Buddists, 145 Hare Krishnas, 74 Sukyo Mahikari, 51 Hindus, 33 Baha'is, etc. registered as members of their parishes.

2. Wiseman (2003, p. 192) used the word *motivation* instead of attitudes.

3. As summarized in Sternberg and Kaufman (2011, p. 572), the term *social intelligence* was first used by Dewey (1909) and Lull (1911), but the modern concept has its origins in work of Thorndike (1920) followed by Moss and Hunt (1927), Vernon (1933), Wechsler (1939, 1958), and so on, but most recently by work of Albrecht and Goleman who both released books on social intelligence in 2006.

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