EXPERT EVALUATION OF TRAINING INTERCULTURAL MEDIATORS IN THE SPHERE OF EDUCATION: SIBERIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Siberian Federal University has been training mediators at the Master’s program level for two years. The training has been carried out in accordance with the practice-based model. The research problem of this study is defining relevant didactic elements in training education mediators who are ready to work with interethnic conflicts.

The purpose of the research was to study the development of the significant competencies of mediators working in the field of education.

The research involved expert survey on the combination and hierarchy of didactic training elements; sociological survey among practicing mediators in schools of Krasnoyarsk; semi-structured expert interviews (Likert scale); practicing mediators' self-assessment of their professional competencies, comparative analysis of Russian and European mediators’ competencies based on the survey adapted from E. Lieberman, Y. Foux-Levy, P. Segala (2005). Heads of school mediation services of Krasnoyarsk took part in the expert interview. Experts were asked to evaluate the relevance of the proposed thirteen didactic components of school mediator training programs in accordance with the Likert scale. The statistical data processing carried out made it possible to identify the hierarchy of the didactic elements. The results of the empirical research allowed identifying and systematizing expert opinion on the importance of the practical component in training intercultural mediators for secondary education. These data correlate with the findings of European colleagues involved in training intercultural mediators. Despite the specific features of the sociocultural context of intercultural mediation in Russian schools related to ethnic diversity, our studies proved the significance of such competencies as manifestation of empathy, neutrality and impartiality, and skills in intercultural communication for a mediator.

Keywords: intercultural mediation, conflict resolution, interethnic relations, professional competency, empathy, neutrality.

1 INTRODUCTION

Improvement of training intercultural mediators in the sphere of education is a pressing issue for Russia, where representatives of 193 nationalities live.

The European Agenda for Culture in a Globalizing World emphasizes that “all over the world, the cultural diversity and the intercultural dialogue became major challenges for a global order based on peace, mutual understanding and respect for common values, as well as protecting and promoting human rights and conservation of languages.” (The European Agenda, 2007) If one succeeds in interaction and exchange between cultures, with the possibility to generate cultural expressions that are shared through dialogue and mutual respect, then we can talk of intercultural relations (Neacșu, 2013).

Russian and European researchers outline that in the globalizing world the role of multicultural mediators in education and social sphere has increased. Intercultural mediation in education is a way to resolve conflicts caused by interethnic contradictions that involve various actors: schoolchildren, teachers, parents, administrators.

According to the European regulations, among which Directive 2008/52/EC on certain aspects of mediation in civil and commercial matters, 2008 and European Code of Conduct for Mediators, the school mediator as agent of the community in relation to school, represents community in school and school within community. The school mediator is part of school community, understands and speaks the community language, has graduated from higher or vocational school or completed an authorized course for the professional training as a school mediator. It is noteworthy that Russia also has the
Professional Mediator Standard (2014), but it does not refer to education and only describes general frameworks of the mediator’s qualification. Therefore, the problem of determining the structure and content of mediator’s competencies for school, as well as outlining significant didactic elements in training multicultural mediators, is quite relevant. The specificity of the work of school mediators is associated with the psychological and social peculiarities of the school age.

The work of the school mediator should take into account hardships of the youth identity formation: personal, ethnic, civil, group and others. Many researchers note that along with the necessity to teach civic consciousness, school faces the increasing cultural, social and ethnic heterogeneity of its pupils, which often results in interpersonal and intergroup conflicts. These conflicts are often resolved with the use of traditional disciplinary methods set forth in each school regulations. One of the main functions of the safe educational environment at school is conflict analysis and management aimed also at its prevention and regulation of interpersonal relationships.

Conflicts mainly refer to insufficient functioning of the group and specific conflicts between arguing students. Mediation can help to prevent and overcome negative demonstrations in the relationships between education actors.

Mediation technologies in education contribute to normalization of interpersonal interaction of adults and learners: they develop empathy, teach to listen to each other and hear one another, accept the position of another person and consider their interests, find compromises taking into account interests of both parties. Mediation allows to efficiently resolve conflicts and to transform the conflict situation into the situation of development (Christie, 2007). Turning to the mediation technology in education requires consolidation of knowledge in the fields of pedagogy, psychology and anthropology for settlement of conflicts and harmonization of interpersonal and intercultural relationships of participants of learning process.

“The intercultural mediator has a key role in optimizing communication between cultures, people and civilizations, in expressing the migrants’ problems and needs in relation to local authorities, in sustaining foreigners, in clarifying and solving some problems, in organizing some socio-cultural events, in facilitating the knowledge of laws of foreigners and their rights and obligations in country” (Neacșu, 2013).

According to B. Halba (2011) intercultural mediation “is a process aiming at enhancing social integration, living together, meeting and gathering people with different backgrounds... Intercultural mediation is not a substitute but a support for migrants to reach autonomy”.

Training mediators for education is not a simple task, as it is hindered by difficulties of intercultural interaction. Intercultural conflicts are considered as opportunities for regulation, and personal and interpersonal transformation, but it can be also considered as a critical approach to the problem, as this type of systematic structure can bring some important changes into school organization (Caetano & Freire, 2004).

As J. Six noted (1995), it is necessary that mediation “becomes the space of personal and social creativity, practice of civic consciousness”. If the mediator is not sufficiently well prepared to complete a real process of mediation, the mediation could easily slide into an arbitrage process, in which a third person (usually someone with a strong institutional relation) imposes a solution to solve the problems or the conflicts (Caetano & Freire, 2004).

There are different models of mediators’ training based on various didactic principles including significant personal and professional mediator competences. Siberian Federal University studied the experience of the European colleagues (the training course for intercultural mediators for migrants worked out within the ERASMUS project TIMES - 2016) while developing the model of a Master’s program in "Mediation in education".

In mediation process, the one who performs the mediator’s role "does not practice any kind of power on other involved people; this person must be neutral and must not take someone’s side, give advices, or tell who is right or wrong; nor is he/she allowed to take decisions; his/her intention is to facilitate the negotiations between the conflict pairs" (Gallardo, 2003).

The research problem is the search for relevant didactic elements in training educators–mediators, ready to work with interethnic conflicts and identification of the most problematic components of professional competencies for intercultural mediators.
2 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the research was to study the development of the significant competencies of mediators working in the field of education. We were aimed at search for optimal combination of various didactic components in training mediators. We studied importance of the theoretical knowledge, case studies and supervision of mediation procedures, membership in mediators’ professional communities, communication and mediation training, legal and ethical standards in mediation.

The research involved expert survey on the combination and hierarchy of didactic training elements; sociological survey among practicing mediators in schools of Krasnoyarsk; semi-structured expert interviews (Likert scale); practicing mediators’ self-assessment of the professional competencies, comparative analysis of Russian and European mediators’ competencies based on the expert survey adapted from E. Lieberman, Y. Foux-Levy, P. Segala (2005) were used.

3 RESULTS

Siberian Federal University has been involved in training mediators at the master’s program level for two years. The Program has practice-based modules and Siberian perspective, i.e. takes into consideration the specific features of multinational structure of Siberian region. (Smolyaninova, 2019). Studying the effectiveness of training and the opinion of the mediators’ professional community are very important for us. It should be understood that the didactic elements of the educational program are in the process of modernization, as academic and professional standards are being changed, and the ethnic composition of students changes as well as a result of migration processes.

Heads of school mediation services of Krasnoyarsk took part in the expert interview. Expert survey studied the attitude of practicing mediators to the relevance of separate didactic components in the process of training mediators for work in the intercultural educational environment. Experts were asked to evaluate the relevance of the proposed seven didactic components of school mediator training programs with the Likert scale.

The statistical data processing carried out made it possible to identify the hierarchy of the didactic elements, shown in the Fig. 1. Experts placed “practical trainings in mediation and communication”, its relevance index is 4.52. Experts placed “analysis of real cases in mediation” on the second place, its relevance index is 4.44. “Theoretical knowledge and supervision” took the third place. According to the expert evaluation the least important in training intercultural mediators is participation of mediators in professional communities (relevance index is 3.84).

![Figure 1. Expert opinion on the relevance of the didactic components in training mediators for education](image)

Fig. 2 presents the results of expert survey on the importance of mediators’ professional competencies and self-assessment of their level of development. The experts were asked to self-assess and rate the
skills such as data gathering and data analysis skills, intercultural communication skills, ability to de-stress the parties during mediation, modeling options for resolving the conflict, empathy and maintaining neutrality.

Figures 3-7 show the results of the expert survey on the importance of professional competences of mediators and self-assessment of their level. Experts were offered to independently assess the importance of the following skills for their professional competence: data gathering and analysis skills, intercultural interaction skills, ability to help the parties to relieve stress during the mediation, modeling conflict resolution options, empathy, maintaining neutrality.

As we can see from Fig. 3, experts’ opinions on the importance of intercultural communication have split into two equal groups: 32% consider this skill significant for mediation and 32% think it is not so important. 36% of respondents pay no attention to it at all. This result seems paradoxical to us and requires further investigation, while based on the results of self-assessment 92% of respondents note that they have this competence well developed. There is a possibility that about 30% of respondents overestimated some competencies levels of development. Also inconsistency of responses concerning importance and self-assessment could be caused by uncertainty of the “intercultural interaction” phenomenon. The competence of intercultural interaction is estimated at the lowest level of all the didactic components of training. However, in the expert opinion, the overwhelming number of practicing mediators have this competence well-developed.
Fig 4. demonstrates the difference in the experts’ positions in high self-assessment of the skill of efficient information collection (92%) and quite a low degree of significance of this competence - only 48%.

There is a significant difference in the assessment by respondents of the stress management skill during the mediation procedures. 84% of respondents outlined that this competence is well developed, although only 48% of experts consider this competence important in the work of a mediator. Obviously, additional detailed study is needed to reveal the low degree of significance of the tolerance for stress in the mediator’s profession, as well as the selection of efficient methods for developing this competence.

The gap between the significance of competences in the profession of the mediator and self-assessment of their level of development for such competences as intercultural interaction, efficient collection of information, conflict resolution and tolerance for stress was quite big. At the same time, such competences as empathy and neutrality showed close agreement of indicators in terms of the level of development and significance (Fig. 6-7). Many Russian and European researchers outline the dominant significance of empathy and neutrality among the competences of practicing mediators in education.

The significance (80 %) of empathy skill for successful mediation procedures are almost at the same level in the expert self-assessment - level of development (72 %). This position in relation to the competence of neutrality is also proved by the data of our expert survey (Fig. 6).
96% of respondents note the significance of neutrality in the mediation procedures and 60% of experts consider this competence well developed (Fig. 7). It is noteworthy that our experiment did not test the real level of development of the competences. Therefore, the assessment is subjective to some extent and may be the result of higher or lower self-assessment. We assume that there can be some deviation of the results obtained during self-assessment from the results of complex external assessment of real ‘neutrality’. Additional research is needed to perform a complex external assessment of competences of mediators and efficiency of didactic components of training.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The study allowed the individual and group reflection over some practices and experiences of practicing mediators and the analysis of some needs. It generated possible improvements of curriculum for intercultural mediators’ training.

The data demonstrate the effectiveness of the basic principles of the practical training model. Practicing mediators consider practical trainings, intercultural interaction trainings and modeling case-situations of intercultural conflicts to be of the greatest interest and benefit. Another key principle of the training model is to gain experience through the mediation of case-study and supervision. Although there is a lack of empirical research to accurately determine the entire list of necessary didactic elements for training multicultural mediators, the importance of practical training for academic programs has been confirmed.

The experiment confirmed the relevance of conducting a more detailed, systematic research on the formation and development of the key competencies of the mediator. Despite some differences in the mediators’ opinion, the general perception after the interviews was that only by using the intercultural dialogue one can reduce the social distance between people of different cultures.

These studies are important for both Russian and foreign practice of conflict resolution and prevention through mediation in education. Additional study of pedagogical technologies and methods is required which will allow the skills of empathy, intercultural interaction and preservation of neutrality to become a personal and professional resource in resolving intercultural contradictions and will lead to the harmonization of interethnic relations in the educational environment.

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