

Education and Spirituality in Kazakhstan: "Self-cognition" Metadiscipline Features and Methods of Teaching

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Abstract

In the 21st century, harmonious combination of intellectual and moral development of an individual is important. How this can be integrated into the educational process? A new subject of Self-Cognition has been introduced into Kazakhstani secondary schools.

Purpose of the Study: Generalization of teaching experience in the new school subject of Self-Cognition and establishing didactic bases for Self-Cognition teaching strategies being the realization of the new century pedagogics.

Research Methods: Observation and generalization of innovative teachers' experience in Self-Cognition, comparison of combined lesson structures with the lesson of Self-Cognition, systematization and analysis of new learning strategies, student interviews to conclude whether they have developed an understanding of the new bases of pedagogical science, structure of Self-Cognition subject planning, differences when compared to other school disciplines.

The content of the subject is based on the Program of spiritual and moral education of Self-Cognition, focusing on holistic approach to the perception of a human and identification of universal values within him/her – Truth, Love, Righteous Conduct, Inner Peace and Non-violence. The main principles of secular teachings on spirituality - Self-Cognition, are humanistic orientation, human values, social interaction, national heritage, and nature-conformity. Significant differences in the strategies of teaching "Self-knowledge" and other school lessons are revealed. The strategies of value-based education, the personal-sense development, storytelling, etc are emphasized. The methodical recommendations for the improvement of education on the subject "Self-knowledge" are suggested that include the active use of cognitive approach and social constructivism, and the extension of art technologies usage.

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1. Introduction

New ideas of the 21st century pedagogy and humane pedagogy are being gradually introduced into mass Kazakhstani school, along with methodology and teaching methods being updated. The introduction of Self-Cognition subject became an important new milestone in updating secondary



education content in Kazakhstan. The subject is unique, since it differs from other subject both in content and style of conduct. It has been first widely introduced into the national education system in academic year 2010/2011. Moreover, higher educational institutions started to prepare the future teachers of Self-Cognition, and for all 'Education' group disciplines there was added a mandatory subject of Self-Cognition.

The initiator of Self-Cognition course introduction was the First Lady of Kazakhstan S.A. Nazarbayeva. For 25 years of Kazakhstan's independence, currently the second concept of teaching the subject at school has been realized. In the first stage, the content of Self-Cognition subject was more focused on ethical and moral standards without emphasizing spirituality. In the second stage of program development the integrity of the concepts of spirituality and morality have been restored (Anarbek, 2016). The very history of the subject teaching can be divided into three periods. The first period covered an experiment conducted in the regions of Kazakhstan with a focus on implementation of spiritual and moral education program. In the second period, Self-Cognition course became a part of secondary school curricula as a compulsory subject and respective state standard, textbooks and teaching materials were developed. In the third period – currently, content and structure analysis of subject teaching is in place and in line with the new concepts (Arinova, 2016). The purpose of the subject is child's development and harmonious development of his/her intellectual and moral capacities.

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2. Main concepts of Self-Cognition subject

The main principle of humanization of education is to return to the origins of a holistic perception of an individual. At the present stage of development of Philosophy, Psychology and Pedagogy, perceptual unity of a person as a trinity of *body-soul-spirit* is being restored. Same works for the Program of moral and spiritual education - Self-Cognition, 'spirit' and 'spirituality' are considered as objective reality, those not deriving from human activity, it being single, inner essence of the whole universe and of the man. In the context of the universe, the Spiritual Reality is manifested as life, movement, development, and sequence. In human consciousness, the Spiritual Reality is manifested as universal values, higher ideals: conscience, love, truth. The uniqueness of human existence lies in the fact that only a human being employing his higher reason is able to become aware of his spiritual nature and inner relationship to the whole universe (Mukazhanova & Omarova, 2014).

Five levels can be classified in the structure of personality: physical, emotional, mental, distinction level (mind), and spiritual level. In the hierarchical structure of a human personality, mind must control

senses, and the higher reason (distinction level) must guide the mind. The rational mind is nourished by the intuitive mind, emotions - by the rational mind, and body – by emotions. The intuitive mind, in turn, is nourished by spiritual level. The genius Albert Einstein said about mind and its role in a very precise manner: “The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift” (Mukazhanova & Omarova, 2014, Mukazhanova, 2015).

The principle of universal value identification, according to which Self-Cognition subject content shall be based on the eternal universal values, understood as a manifestation of the higher spiritual nature of a human being. It should be emphasized that moral and spiritual education, carried out within the Self-Cognition subject teaching is not religious but secular education, treating physical, mental, spiritual and moral nature of a man in the unity thereof. Absolute universal values that are inherent in a man **since birth** are *Truth, Love, Righteous Behavior (Duty), Inner Peace (Peace), Non-violence*.

Truth is what remains unchanged, the fundamental principle of life: spirituality pervading the whole of creation, the coessence inherent in the entire creation. There is only one absolute Truth, which is the source of all the others. When one finds it, his/her actions are co-tuned with it. It is not subject to changes in time - past, present and future

Righteous Behavior is behavior in line with duty and obligations, when acts are according to the inner voice of conscience.

Love - pure, unselfish and unconditional love, being the energy creating and powering the life. Love is understood as *positive energy of a human*, which can be shared with others. For example, a mother embracing a child gives him the *energy* of love.

Inner Peace - perfect peace of mind, the underlying nature of a man.

Non-violence – causing no harm to anyone, neither by thought, nor by word or action.

3. Teaching methods - design of Self-Cognition lessons at school

It is indeed a creative process when a teacher gets prepared for Self-Cognition lessons, the process of understanding the spiritual values backed up by professional and life experience. It is a constant creative search for a lesson plan, its storyline. Lesson themes are aimed at uncovering the values. For example, Dream and Reality, Joy of Life, Love and Human Destiny, etc.

Positive thinking is shaped by using the elements of relaxation techniques such as Light, Imaginary Walk in the Forest, Imaginary Undersea Adventure and others (Mukazhanova, 2013). Most teachers perform this practice to a relaxing meditation music. It lasts for 3-4 minutes. In the course of positive thinking students, so to speak, harmonize the relationships with their Self, concentrate attention, “expand their consciousness”, imagine themselves being a part of the universe, being the light, relax, shape the mindset of positive development, and positive perception of the world. It is consistent with the value of Peace. Here, a teacher must have relevant psychological background, must learn how to use, so to say, the coaching Wizard’s tone (Atkinson & Chois, 2015). Since music and context are positive, this practice actually strengthens the students’ health, reduces stress, and helps to develop intuition. Positive thinking practice, apart from pursuing current academic challenges, will help the students in learning how to self-control, control their attitude, mood, overcome stresses in the future.

After that, students share their positive impressions related to the positive thinking practice.

According to the subject of a lesson, the teacher selects a positive quotation – great people sayings. Students pronounce and discuss it. They may agree or disagree with it, adjust it for themselves, argue their opinion, offer another great person's quote, including alternative one, or extend the idea by adding another great statement. The students grow to comprehend meanings; it is communication of ideas, and even of generations. Since students are very spontaneous and represent a new generation, sometimes they tend to “overthrow the authorities”, therefore it is important that one is able to support innovative approaches, to argue his/her point of view. The teacher listens carefully, bearing in mind stimulating questions, and should be able to moderate the discussion, summarize, and, where appropriate, to correct the answers, and improvise.

UNESCO recommended storytelling as a modern teaching strategy for the 21st century (UNESCO, 2010). A teacher either tells or shows a video about stories related to the idea of the lesson or value. A discussion of meanings should continue according to the storyline - what the main idea of the story is, how students understand it, lessons learnt, matters of understanding and reflection, amazing ideas, and things that the story urges to do. A story, a parable or a short novel, selected by the teacher, should unfold the theme of the lesson and be aimed at identifying universal values. Very often when selecting the stories teachers are following ethnopedagogical ideas, wisdom, traditional education, stories about historical figures of Kazakhstan.

Then students perform a creative assignment, often being divided into teams. Problematic, creative methods, such as brainstorming, role-playing games, staging, art technologies, cognitive technologies, etc, are applied. The performance of this assignment provides for the concept of social constructivism, teaches the strategies for teamwork, and ideally, brings to the level of metacognitive strategies for shaping collective decisions, to the selection of interpersonal communication methods and is focused on the development of intuitive thinking. Competent arrangement and interesting assignment awaken the Heart, creating not only “the synthesis of intelligence, passion and action” (Slastenin & etc., 2002) in the team, but also the development of intuition and inspiration. Then teams of students or pupils make presentations on their decisions.

At the final stage, on a high note, students sing a song linked to the subject or universal values by meaning. This method is consistent with bringing the students onto the level of Mind, powering their positive thinking. At the same time, a union of students is observed. Teacher can choose a song in any language - Kazakh, English, or Russian. Songs can be old well-known or modern ones. Students are allowed to stand when performing creative assignments and songs. They can even dance when singing a song. The whole environment, the classroom vibe, its designation and development change. We have often wondered what potential lies down there in a song. It is worthwhile noting that in churches the performance of songs by a choir fulfills a spiritual union function. How about holidays, when everyone is in the mood for singing? It has spiritual, relaxing, and emotional effect.

To conclude, a home assignment is given followed by a moment of peacefulness.

Let's compare structures of combined traditional school lesson and that of Self-Cognition (See Table).

Table 1. Comparison of combined lesson and Self-Cognition lesson structures

	Combined Lesson	Self-Cognition Lesson
Lesson structures	Greeting	Greeting
	Introduction	Positive thinking
	Home assignment review	Home assignment review
	Questions	
	Explanation of new material	Quote of the lesson Conversation – Storytelling
	Consolidation of knowledge, skills and competencies	Creative teamwork Singing together
	Home assignment and conclusion	Home assignment and conclusion Concluding element of the lesson – a moment of peacefulness
Analysis	Analysis: - focus on didactic task; - focus on knowledge, more frequent reproductive student activity; - etc.	Analysis: - analysis to identify universal values and storyline, i.e. focus on personal development; - focus on value-semantic development of each student; -outcomes – spiritual and moral education, unity of thoughts, words and actions, value-based approach to the world.
Advantages	Advantages: - structured knowledge, skills and competencies, system of knowledge; - logical design of knowledge; -discipline, teacher- and learning-oriented education; -focus on cognitive ability.	Advantages: Faith in humanistic principles; realization of social constructivism, pedagogy of existentialism, environmental pedagogy, “living the moment”; storytelling strategy (parables), showing videos; practicing relaxing techniques, purification of mind, development of intuitive reasoning; possibility to employ coaching practices – strong open questions, the Wizard’s, the Wise Elder’s, the Friend’s coaching tones (M. Atkinson, 2015); outcome frames, etc.
Risks	- consolidation of reproductive way of thinking; - passive attitude of some students	- depends on teacher’s personality – his/her spiritual culture, pedagogical and psychological background knowledge and competencies, pedagogical creativeness; - technical equipment of classrooms; - artificially favorable school environment may decrease students’ adaptability in real-life competitive community outside the school

Analysis of Self-Cognition teaching experience indicates the priority of value-semantic content of education, focus on modern pedagogical and psychological theories and technologies. In this particular case, it is important to have faith in man, in his/her humanistic potential and positive essence. A variety of approaches is applied: activity, environment-based, existential, multicultural, dialogical, and others.

B. Brdička systematized leading ideas for didactical upgrade from “behaviorism → cognitivism → constructivism → to connectionism” (Brdička, 2012). G. Siemens (Siemens, 2006) put the idea of connectionism forward. When designing lessons there lies great potential of teaching not only social construction of their relationships and space by students, but also the potential of applying connectivity approach. For example, formulation of assignments according to “Blended Learning” technology, search for interesting stories and videos by students themselves in the Internet, etc. At the same time, there are high risks in teaching the subject, such as “dependence” on teacher’s personality, subjectivity of pedagogical activity, his/her knowledge, competences, creativity. This vision requires improving the system of professional competence development.

4. Assessment of Self-Cognition teaching experience during school practice by university students - future teachers

Undergraduates majoring in Social Pedagogy and Self-Cognition passed teaching practice at school during one semester, actively giving Self-Cognition lessons under the supervision of experienced schoolteachers. As a feedback, a student survey was conducted at the end of the practice in the form of a questionnaire. Assessment of Self-Cognition by undergraduates turned out to be quite interesting. What are the peculiarities in teaching Self-Cognition? Students outline, firstly, social and motivational attitude of students, and secondly - new methods of teaching, as well as requirements to teachers.

Student A.S. listed the following features: *“A) it is just Self-Cognition lessons that develop students’ motivation to self-cognition, understanding the purpose of life and their calling; B) Self-Cognition lessons due to such methods as creative activity, group singing, conversation (telling parables, stories) develop the ability of team work and networking; C) they develop such qualities as self-confidence, responsibility for their thoughts, words and deeds, nurture selfless love and kindness to others, sensitivity, compassion, concern, understanding of the unity of creation.”*

E.D. *“A) a teacher should possess high moral qualities; B) and he/she should be strongly motivated to train and educate children; C) teacher’s creativity really matters”.*

D.S. *“A) Lack of student assessment. Accordingly, students get more opportunities to open up, without worrying about being assessed; B) exchange of practical experience with students; C) the need to know particular features of each student’s personality; D) respectful attitude to all the words and thoughts of students, ability to tactfully adjust whatever is deviant or destructive”.*

One of the students responded as follows when asked about the need to teach such a subject at school: *“Self-Cognition is a special subject, having priceless spiritual value that makes every student spiritual and moral, happy and joyful, kind and wise when such value is shared. At Self-Cognition lessons the development of moral and spiritual qualities in children is provided given their individual characteristics” (B.M.).*

The questionnaire covered students’ proposals to improve the teaching of the subject. The proposals mainly related to the forms and methods of teaching. They can be summarized as follows: (A.S.) *“In*

my opinion, it is necessary to prepare several options of lesson structure. Since there are different topics, content of lessons, likewise, shall be special for each specific need. Sometimes one needs to tell more stories, but sometimes - more creative assignments (not only in groups) ...” D.S.: “It should be recommended to hold some Self-Cognition lessons at the schoolyard, in parks, in an informal setting”.

5. Findings

Introduction of Self-Cognition subject corresponds to the pedagogy of the 21st century, and allows providing for the development of intelligence and spirituality concepts. This is important under forward looking education focusing on the progress of science, the creation of new breakthrough technologies, and space exploration. Lesson designing applies modern storytelling strategy, value-based education, coaching, and relaxation. Actual use of psychological relaxation techniques, reference and orientation to Jung's theory, humanistic psychology of A. Maslow and K. Rogers, neuro-linguistic programming theory, M. Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory and others.

It is recommended to include few cognitive concepts (perhaps just foundations of social, emotional intellect) into senior grades curriculum, to take advantage of the cognitive approach and social constructivism, expand the use of art technologies, to teach resilience and coping behavior. Thus, it is possible to expand the content and expected results from learning the lesson by real-life behavioral skills.

6. Conclusion

Teachers certified by Bobek National Scientific, Practical, and Wellness Center are allowed to teach Self-Cognition. Of course, to conduct a lesson, apart from Self-Cognition program a teacher should possess good axiological culture, a rich inner world, constantly pursue inner spiritual work; be able to attract different students to dialogue, to argue. The educator must be a role model of a person living in the unity of thought, word and deed. It is important for the teacher to master the art of combing lesson blocks by theme as a storyline based on the principle of identifying the universal values, and to be able to make transitions with a focus on the subject and value. In fact, it is more like a role of writer and director rather than teacher.

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