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**MODERN HUMANITARIAN APPROACHES TO RESEARCH ON  
CHARACTER BUILDING IN THE INFORMATION AGE**

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*Abstract*

The paper discusses a number of approaches (transdisciplinary, interdisciplinary, constructivist and transformational) applied in various liberal arts. Their application is explained in a comparative context. The need to follow paradigm-related dogmas creates the conflict with a many-factor nature of the modern research and the problem-setting related to several scientific fields at a time. In the sphere of pedagogy building moral education on the transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches makes it possible not only to use credible research data but also have a better understanding of the moral education object. However, the paper also looks at other approaches which are closely related to pedagogy but have been underestimated in research of character building and its implementation in educational institutions: ambivalent, acmeological, co-evolutionary, event-based and synergetic approaches. The choice of these approaches is explained both by the world and domestic social development challenges (which have a direct influence on Russian school and university students' character building) and objectives of each particular research as well as the realisation of the character building process. Such challenges are represented in the paper.

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## 1. Introduction

To define modern approaches to character building research and the realisation it is necessary to pinpoint the world and domestic social development challenges which have a direct influence on Russian school and university students' character building. Here are some of them:

- unstable economic development;
- the collision of globalisation and regionalization processes;
- the growth of nationalistic and xenophobic attitudes, demonstration of extremism among young people as well as the youth criminalization in a number of Russian regions;
- prevalence of declarative moral norms over the currently existing ones in the society;
- the blurred feeling of responsibility in various layers of the society;
- arising problems of ethnocultural interaction;
- intensified migration processes;
- consolidation of the rigid administration system in various areas of activity and on various levels;
- poor coordination of interaction between social institutions;
- stratification of the Russian society;
- the traditional family crisis;
- the rapid development of the consumer society;
- increased role of mass media, "information wars";
- increased role of aggressive religions wings in the society;
- penetration of IT into all spheres of human activity;
- intensive development of transnational education.

The analysis of this far from complete list of contemporary challenges in the world and domestic development shows the contradictory and complicated environment for the personality development of modern school and university students. Notably, some of the above challenges have existed for a long time while others have revealed themselves in full just recently.

Development of virtual environment in a present-day educational institution (either school or university) is vital in the creation of character building space.

Of course, IT are significantly less represented in moral than academic education. However, this implies a certain advantage as we may analyse the IT-related experience in academic education and avoid some errors on the way of their implementation in the character building domain. First of all, we mean immersion of children and young people into virtual reality and various social nets when real socialisation is replaced by communication in social nets or the negative influence of websites promoting extremism, porn content, religious cults, drugs or suicide. Another risk is posed by aggressive computer games which create the illusion that it is easy to kill and promote various forms of violence.

We must admit that though immense positive experience has been accumulated in solving the problems of character building, it is either not known to the wide public and professional community or remains not called for.

Thus, the existing situation, on the one hand, requires transformations in character building sphere and, on the other hand, opens new opportunities for development of both theory and practice of moral education.

Approaches pay an important part in solving the problem of moral education and building its system. Such approaches are widely discussed both in Russian and foreign pedagogy. There is an opinion that all approaches may be limited to four types: the disciplinary approach, the interdisciplinary approach, the multidisciplinary (polidisciplinary) approach and the transdisciplinary approach (Kozlov, 2017).

Each science, including pedagogy, has its own subject-related knowledge which became dogmatic if not developed or enriched by other sciences. Unfortunately, an attempt to separate itself from new knowledge or to call it anti-scientific results in significant retardation in any science. The need to follow paradigm-related dogmas creates the conflict with the fact that modern research has, as a rule, many-factor nature, and the description and explanation of problems may not be provided by only one science. For each particular science there is only one way out: to be enriched by other sciences and thus correct and adjust its own paradigm.

One solution in the above situation is to overcome the border which hypothetically divides disciplines, to apply the approach that unites rather than separates these disciplines. It is known as the transdisciplinary approach. Jean Piaget was among the first who drew attention to this approach (Piaget, 1972).

Today the term “transdisciplinary” has a wider meaning than the one suggested by Jean Piaget. In the current conditions of scientific knowledge “transdisciplinary” means some meta-methodology or a synthesis of methodologies, a contemporary standard in learning about the world when the scientific knowledge is studied on several levels simultaneously, e.g. globally and locally, on the physical and mental levels De Mello, Kiyashenko, Knyazeva, Kolesnikova, Moiseev, Tagunova (Mello, 2001; Kiyashchenko, 2009; Knyazeva, Kurdyumov, 2010; Kolesnikova, 2014; Broersma, 2014; Tagunova, 2016).

Besides, “transdisciplinary” also means the principle of scientific knowledge organisation which offers opportunities in the interrelationship of many scientific disciplines in order to provide an integrated solution of research problems. The transdisciplinary approach enables a researcher to go beyond the limits of their disciplines.

Interdisciplinary research involves more resources, time, effort and budget than mono-research. In particular, such studies are related to higher risks when attempting to comprehend data obtained during research. On the other hand, interdisciplinary studies provide up-to-date knowledge and solutions to complex social problems. Interdisciplinary research in education may be conducted within social and natural sciences. Interdisciplinary studies solve a number of tasks including the development of educational methodology, wider possibilities in pedagogy due to a creation of new disciplines (like the recently developed discipline of “neuroscience of teaching”), or the solution of some vital social problem.

The choice of disciplines to include in interdisciplinary research differs in each particular case. Thus, the choice of disciplines depends on the research problem (which is essentially interdisciplinary). Involving another discipline may be prompted by the necessity to implement the results of fundamental research into practice. Involving another discipline into a pedagogical research project may be caused by

the need for researchers to commercialise their results. In some cases the inclusion of other disciplines to pedagogical research helps to obtain detailed research data for the given problem.

The interdisciplinary approach becomes one of the leading tools in organising pedagogical research in Russia (Demakova, Litvinova, Snopkova, and others.). (Demakova, 2008; Litvinova, Ochka, 2015; Snopkova, 2015). The interdisciplinary approach to pedagogical research involves the joint effort of participants from various fields of knowledge.

The interdisciplinary approach in education requires an additional mandatory phase. This phase involves assessment of possible research limits on the given problem. Tait and Lyall argue that this research phase is necessary to solve a number of problems which are vital for the research including justification of approaches and methods of all involved disciplines in the solution of the joint objective as well as discussion of ways to modify the existing approaches (Tait, Lyall, 2007; Bruce et al., 2004). Interdisciplinary research is not a mechanic merger of several disciplines in one research project. It is necessary to take additional effort in order to form a coherent research team consisting of participants from various disciplines. It is important to overcome communication problems between representatives of various disciplines. In particular, such problems may include different viewpoints, methods or terminology.

## **2. Research Questions**

The logic of pedagogical research related to character building process and its implementation in the real-life practice significantly depend on the choice and development of humanitarian approaches. In its turn, the choice of approaches depends on the researcher's point of view and the objectives which the researcher plans to achieve in the character building process. The research question is to define what kind of approach is to be used in character building process to achieve better results.

## **3. Purpose of the Study**

To define modern approaches to character building research and implementation in educational institutions taking into consideration the world and domestic social development challenges which have the direct influence on Russian school and university students' character building.

## **4. Research Methods**

The following research methods have been used: analysis, generalisation, comparison, interpretation, systematisation, and journey into the historical domain.

## **5. Findings**

We have defined both traditional humanitarian approaches to pedagogical research of character building and its implementation in educational institutions and the approaches which are still underestimated in spite of their obvious relevance both for the contemporary character building process and its development.

The above world and domestic social development challenges demand the prioritisation of such pedagogical problems as interrelationship of multicultural and patriotic, civil and religious education; shaping socio-cultural and civic identity; consumer society versus moral and environmental education; education in the IT modified communicative environment.

Unfortunately, we observe the situation when not only family but also school and university as social institutions are increasingly losing their authority in young people's character building process.

Besides, information technologies are intensively penetrating all spheres of human activity, and especially education. There is no doubt that IT may dramatically change the system of education by creating new conditions for personality development of children and young people.

Penetration of IT into moral education seems to be much more modest. However, researchers have already shown the potential for growth in character building. This includes various projects (social, art and local lore projects); virtual museums (official museums and those set up in various educational establishments); websites of schools, universities, non-government children's and youth associations and organizations; school-related newspapers, magazines and videos; mobile technologies (applications, e.g. using QR codes, which make it possible for students to access various educational resources and assignments); social networking communities based on educational institutions. (Selivanova, Tagunova, 2016; Selivanova, Tagunova, 2016).

Building moral education on the transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches makes it possible not only to use credible research data but also have a better understanding of the moral education object.

Qualitative research is based on diverse viewpoints with constructivist mindset being one of them. This approach, now more actively used in the west, is represented by Strauss' The Discovery of Grounded Theory (Strauss, Glaser, 1999). The leading concept of qualitative constructivist research is "triangulation", or involvement of multiple points of view to produce understanding. In qualitative research, which is based on a constructivist view of the world where there is no single truth but any truth is relative and the truth is constructed by a particular individual or the society in which the individual lives, triangulation refers to the identification and recording various points of view. Within the Grounded Theory data are interpreted in order to shape the research concept or suggest hypotheses. This is a search and discovery process, which is not aimed to validate or disprove a previously suggested hypothesis. This approach is the exact opposite of the positivist outlook. The constructivist paradigm developed from E. Husserl and Dilthey's phenomenology and ideas of other German philosophers interpreting understanding. The constructivist approach to research is an interpretational one as it is aimed at understanding the world of human experience supposing that "reality is socially constructed" (Mertens, 2005). By applying this approach the researcher tries to understand all points of view on the discussed problem, considers the experience of all the participants and admits the influence of other opinions on the researcher's own investigation. As a rule, unlike positivists, constructivists do not start research based on one theory. They develop the theory in the process of research and look for meanings in the context of the studied problem. A constructivist researcher usually relies on qualitative methods of data collection and analysis while a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (mixed methods) is used less often. Quantitative data are used solely to enrich qualitative data.

The transformational paradigm appeared in the 1980s-1990s, partly due to dissatisfaction with the prevailing scientific paradigms and practice and also because most social theories developed within prevailing paradigms were believed to have been “developed from the masculine point of view” (Mertens, 2005). Researchers applying the transformational approach assumed that the constructivist approach to research would not enable them to adequately solve problems of social justice.

The transformational approach implies that the research must necessarily include a political point of view on the subject of study and also contain the description of politically appropriate reforming strategies and tactics which will help to change the life of both research agents and researchers (Creswell, 2003). Researchers relying on this approach apply qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis to a greater extent similar to constructivists. However, it is an application of mixed methods which makes it possible for such researchers to ensure the transformational function of research. Such type of research, according to a number of scholars, makes it possible to understand a greater range of values and viewpoints on the same subject of research (Somekh, Lewin, 2005).

Some of the above approaches have already found their place in pedagogy and are used in both research and educational practice while others are just beginning to penetrate into the pedagogical theory and practice. First of all, this is the constructivist (Kozyrev, Shatalova and others.) and the transformational (now mainly used in teaching linguistics) approaches (Kozyrev, 2007; Shatalova, 2010; Selivanova, Tagunova, 2016).

We may name another group of approaches which have become traditional in the Russian pedagogy: activity-based, personality-oriented, age-related, differentiated, nature-aligned, systemic and environment-related.

Meanwhile, there is a group of approaches which, though having existed in pedagogy for a long time, have not become widespread either in pedagogical research or practice. These include the ambivalent (Novikova), acmeological (Bodalev), co-evolutional (Orlov), event-based (Grigoryev, Drozd) and synergetic (Selivanova) approaches (Sovremennye podkhody v teorii i praktike vospitaniya, 2001).

Let us have a closer look at the approaches of this group.

These include the ambivalent (Novikova) approach developed as a result of combination of various phenomena in pedagogical practice (collective and individuality, chaos and order, freedom and responsibility, differentiation and integration) and the philosophic concept of ambivalence as “the human ability to comprehend any personally interesting phenomenon through a ‘dual opposition’ or from two opposite sides and seemingly mutually exclusive and contradictory (Sovremennye podkhody v teorii i praktike vospitaniy, 2001). Ambivalence is the integration mechanism of mutually exclusive sides, their mutual transformation, completion and interpenetration. This approach may be of two types: inversion and meditation. Inversion is characterised by absolutization of opposite poles. Meditation shifts the gravity centre beyond the limits of transfer from one pole of the existing opposition to the other. Pedagogical research and practice often overemphasise inversion and underestimate meditation: school should be only in perfect order as chaos is a negative feature; there is only free character building promoting the only development of the personality but not the collective. This approach is not only far from real but also impoverishes the pedagogical reality.

The problem of young person's awareness of the joint development of nature and humanity lead to the necessity to introduce the co-evolutional approach in the pedagogical process. Its implementation in environmental education ensured a new attitude to the formation of school students' ecological culture by organising sociocultural niches in school and socionatural niches in nature. Such niches offer environmentally appropriate life behaviour of students and teachers (Orlov, 1997).

The acmeological approach was introduced in pedagogy by Bodalev. "Acmeology is the science that studies the development of man in adulthood and man's achievement of the highest point in this development as a human being (natural species), a personality and a subject of activity (mostly professional)" (Sovremennye podkhody v teorii i praktike vospitaniya, 2001). Apart from the big acme there are age-related "precursors" of man's micro-acme in each age period. These micro-acmes must be achieved for the man to have big acme. Acmeology and pedagogy are aimed at determining the specific characteristics of micro-acme in each age period so that a child may reach its acme in the future. Another goal is to create such a system of character building in which a child could, so to say, move from one acme to another and while on the way there should be psychological and pedagogical mechanisms to compensate for unfavourable conditions

The event-based approach to character building is related to the notion of a pedagogical event. "A pedagogical event is a moment of reality in which a developmental, purposeful and value-oriented meeting of the adult and child (their co-event) takes place. A pedagogical event functions as educational space provided that "meeting" with children adults keep in their mind (and also consider in their activity) the goals and values of the young generation while children are free and responsible in opting for cooperation with adults as a mode of their life activity" (Grigoryev) (Sovremennye podkhody v teorii i praktike vospitaniya, 2001, p. 69).

A further development of moral education systems theory required the research of self-organization systems and their management within the self-organization (synergy) theory which features universalism, noncontradiction and thoroughness when studying various levels of self-organization.

Established to serve the needs of natural sciences, the theory of self-organization is increasingly penetrating into the sphere of social and liberal studies. It has already demonstrated its application in arts, politics and psychology. This theory is not a negation of the systemic approach but rather its further development.

The need to refer to ideas of self-organization is also explained by the fact that until now we used to study really existing systems of mostly spontaneous origin. But moral education systems are also created intentionally.

If the moral education system is considered as a non-linear but open (i.e., the system that may adjust to external conditions but retain its distinguishing features) and self-organized, it may be presented in a new light. We have a fuller and more adequate understanding of processes which place in the system.

That is why it is important to pay attention to such principles of the self-organization theory as:

- the presence of unstable or changeable states in the system points to its stable and dynamic development;
- minor impacts and processes taking place on the micro-level may play a crucial role for the system;

- the future condition of the system seems to somewhat attract, organises and forms its present condition;
- there is a range of ways for the system to develop depending on its inner characteristics, and it must offer alternative ways;
- the system control must rely on “resonance” influence where its main factor is its architecture (structure) rather than force.

## 6. Conclusion

To some extent, the humanitarian approach is the antithesis of the naturalistic approach. The former is often characterised as a “soft” approach. It is most suitable to study the problems of character building and organise moral education. The choice of a particular approach is crucial here. We must assess its applicability in each individual case. Integrated use of many approaches must not result in a contradictory situation both in research or implementation of moral education.

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