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DOI <https://doi.org/10.24136/rsf.2023.009>

MULTICULTURALISM IN POLISH SCHOOLS

Abstract: Nowadays, multiculturalism is highly prevalent, and as a result, there are many challenges in school communities. Culture has a massive impact on the behaviour of individuals and the educational process. Hence, schools should be well-prepared for the challenges related to cultural diversity. Moreover, teachers should be equipped to support the integration of international students and foster positive attitudes towards multiculturalism among learners. Educators should have highly developed multicultural competencies and avoid stereotypes and prejudices. The article discusses how teachers can use their authority to foster the proper attitudes toward multiculturalism among students. It also examines the impact of the increasing number of Ukrainian refugee students on Polish schools and their communities.

Keywords: multiculturalism, cultural diversity, education, teacher, multicultural competencies.

Tytuł: Wielokulturowość w Polskich Szkołach

Abstrakt: W dzisiejszych czasach zjawisko wielokulturowości jest niezwykle powszechne, co w konsekwencji wiąże się z licznymi wyzwaniami dla społeczności szkolnych. Kultura ma znaczący wpływ na zachowania jednostek oraz proces edukacji, dlatego szkoły powinny być dobrze przygotowane na wszechobecną różnorodność. Co więcej, nauczyciele powinni być właściwie wyposażeni do wspierania integracji nowoprzybyłych uczniów i szerzenia właściwych postaw związanych z wielokulturowością. By to zrobić, muszą mieć wysoko rozwinięte kompetencje międzykulturowe oraz unikać stereotypów i uprzedzeń. Niniejszy artykuł omawia znaczenie autorytetu nauczyciela w edukacji wielokulturowej oraz propagowaniu właściwych wzorców wśród wychowanków. Omówiono również sytuację związaną z przybyciem uchodźców z Ukrainy do Polskich szkół oraz wpływ, jaki wywarła ona na szkolne społeczności.

Słowa kluczowe: wielokulturowość, różnorodność kulturowa, edukacja, nauczyciel, kompetencje wielokulturowe.

Multiculturalism in Polish Schools

In the modern world, many social and educational changes occur. Cultural diversity is encountered daily, and it is essential to understand the issue of multiculturalism and be open to changes. It is crucial to address the unique needs of newcomers and overcome challenges related to cultural differences in society. Hence, schools must aim to provide international students with suitable educational conditions.

In recent years, the interest in multicultural education has grown. It can be observed that the number of foreigners attending Polish schools has increased significantly. Multiple Ukrainian, Belarusian, Vietnamese, and many other nationalities, as well as ethnic minority individuals, have decided to make Poland their permanent home. As a result, there has been a notable rise in the enrolment of international students in the Polish educational system over the last decade. In 2009, the number of foreigners enrolled in the system was 9610; in 2019, it reached 51363¹.

Due to the tense global situation, Polish schools have increased focus on multiculturalism. After the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022, many refugees arrived in Poland, and consequently, the number of international students increased. Current data shows that Polish schools and kindergartens have 187.9 thousand children and young people from Ukraine who came to Poland after the Russian aggression against their country². These data indicate that the Polish educational system faces massive challenges, such as organizing assistance for international students and supporting their integration and learning process.

Multicultural education has become increasingly relevant in recent decades, owing to social factors like globalization, greater mobility, and growing migration flows. Schools play a crucial role in facilitating cultural exchange and providing opportunities for daily interaction among diverse groups in society. As globalization continues to blur national borders and people from different countries increasingly interact with one another, the definition of culture is increasingly complex and multifaceted. It encompasses people's way of life, the production of material and symbolic goods, value systems, beliefs, and opinions. It is *"the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, that encompasses, not only art and literature, but lifestyles, ways*

¹ <https://www.nik.gov.pl/aktualnosci/ksztalcenie-dzieci-cudzoziemcow-i-powracajacych-do-kraju.html>, [accessed: 11.10.2023.].

² <https://strefaedukacji.pl/blisko-190-tys-dzieci-i-mlodziezy-z-ukrainy-w-polskich-szkolach-mein-sytuacja-sie-ustabilizowala/ar/c5-17433117>, [accessed: 12.10.2023.].

*of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs*³. According to this viewpoint, culture is *"established, accepted, passed down from generation to generation, and generally stable laws exclusive to a group of people"* (Matsumoto, Juang, 2007:575). Hence, it tremendously impacts the school environment and relationships between community members.

From the earliest childhood, norms of behaviour that are inextricably tied to culture are instilled in children. With time, schools become an integral part of the upbringing process, where students develop cultural sensitivity and acquire appropriate behaviour patterns typical of their cultural background. They learn to address teachers, build relationships with their peers and adults, and develop specific patterns of behaviour accepted in their cultural circle. The behavioural patterns students adopt result from the norms the community embraces. They are deeply rooted and very often unconscious. Cultural differences can be ascertained through a clash with individuals from a different culture, observing their behaviour and customs, which sometimes seem unusual. When children join a school community in a foreign country, they face many difficulties and challenges related to cultural differences. Education plays a vital role in the cultural integration of children and young people, so schools must be well-prepared to welcome international students (Białek, 2015:7).

Culturally diverse societies are characterized by the complexity of relationships between their members. Students from different cultural backgrounds may unconsciously exhibit behaviours typical of their culture but not understood in the country where they have arrived. Such situations can cause misunderstandings among peers and are also stressful for teachers. Through cultural differences, contact between teachers and parents can also prove challenging. Several factors can impact communication, such as different perceptions of education and learning, contrasts between countries' educational systems, or proficiency in Polish. The multicultural competencies of students and teachers influence relations in culturally diverse school communities, so it is essential to develop cultural awareness (Ibidem, p. 12).

Education has a significant impact on society, as it shapes the culture of a community. Schools play a crucial role in creating an integrated multicultural society, promoting mutual acceptance regardless of skin colour, background or beliefs, and instilling high values in young people. A school operating in a multicultural environment conducts socialisation and educational activities aimed at multicultural education, which is critical for students' socialisation and functioning in social circles. It is a place where students acquire cultural and technical competencies necessary for efficient interaction with others and forming a specific community. Additionally, a school performs essential functions such as advisory, environmental, and culture-forming, creating a space for community-building. In a changing multicultural society, the school becomes

³ <https://policytoolbox.iiep.unesco.org/glossary/cultures/>, [accessed: 14.10.2023.].

an meaningful place for social contact between learners, acquiring and forming attitudes, as well as selecting and systematising knowledge (Szempruch, 2020:85-87).

Multicultural education is essential in countering hurtful prejudices and stereotypes that negatively affect integration into the school community. They lead to discrimination, stigmatisation and even exclusion of individuals and social groups (Welskop, 2013:41). The main objective of multicultural education is to develop cultural awareness among children and young people, building a positive attitude toward diversity, people from different cultures and their customs. In addition, these goals include building cultural identity, learning readiness, developing mutual respect and acceptance, and reducing views based on ethical and religious fundamentalism. Multicultural education aims to provide every student, regardless of national or ethnic origin, equal opportunities and good conditions to learn, develop their potential and achieve their educational goals. In addition, it is essential to build a society free of discrimination and prejudice and develop empathy and multicultural competencies among all school community members (Levinson, 2007:2).

Multiculturalism is associated with the interpenetration of cultures, customs, and diverse patterns that become apparent in behaviour, values, or language. It involves intermingling customs and values of coexisting groups or individuals, greatly influencing each other. It is inseparable from the appreciation of different cultures' uniqueness and the cultivation of one's own. Multiculturalism manifests respect for other people's values while maintaining one's own. The exchange of cultural experiences is significantly developing, helping to expand cultural awareness and create a society based on high values (Welskop, 2013:43).

Multiculturalism in teacher's work

The role of a teacher in multicultural education is crucial. Educators have a significant role in influencing students to develop an open-mindedness towards diversity. Thus, they must have a detailed knowledge of the values learners have been taught in early childhood. Teachers should prepare young people to interact with others in society, regardless of the learner's background or worldview. Hence, it is essential that students freely express their thoughts and reflections, and the educator should demonstrate the ability to interact with them in the teaching process. An educator should foster students' appreciation of diversity, respect for other cultures, and understanding of equality. The role of a teacher is essential, so they should develop multicultural competencies, be open to cultural diversity, and not display prejudices. Teachers must also relate to situations students know, noticeable in their environment. In this way, they will reach out to learners and affect their thinking by showing positive role models and passing on high values to young people (Ibidem, p. 45).

Furthermore, teachers should refer to problems among students related previously acquired prejudices and stereotypes. If such difficulties arise, they should be resolved through open communication to reduce biases and prevent stigmatisation

of individuals with different cultural backgrounds or minority groups. Only sincere dialogue with students can resolve obstacles from deeply rooted, often unconscious, hurtful prejudices. Therefore, teacher's role in settling potential conflicts over cultural diversity is vital (Ibidem, p. 46).

A teacher should also help learners understand their cultural identity, how others perceive them and how they adapt to the expectations of their surroundings. They should also show how perceptions of different cultures are influenced by pervasive stereotypes and how membership in social groups affects the value system, behaviour and beliefs adopted. Stereotypes and biases can sometimes push an individual to conform to the dominant culture and abandon their own; it may also lead to lower self-esteem, which can have unpleasant consequences. Therefore, the teacher's role in combating prejudice and fostering respect and tolerance for diversity is crucial (Byram, 2000:20-21).

Teacher's qualifications for multicultural education

Teachers must possess advanced communicative competencies, including coherence and communicative unity, openness towards other cultures, integration abilities, proficiency in language, and cultural knowledge to ensure the success of multicultural education. In addition to the qualities mentioned above, educators need to display characteristics such as "*tolerance for ambiguity, cognitive flexibility, cultural identity, patience, enthusiasm and commitment, interpersonal skills, openness to new experiences and other cultures, empathy, respect and a sense of humour*" (Welskop, 2013:47). A teacher plays a huge role in the learning process. Therefore, they are more likely to attain teaching success if they possess these competencies. Otherwise, they may find broadening their students' cultural awareness difficult. Hence, teachers need to develop their multicultural competencies constantly.

The teacher's approach to multiculturalism is critical. They should adopt the view that all cultures are equal and should be treated with respect. They should be open to diversity and avoid stereotypes and prejudices. The teacher's task is to foster attitudes of tolerance and acceptance towards individuals from different cultural backgrounds among learners. In classes that address the issue of multiculturalism, the educator should point out the positive features of other cultures while simultaneously trying to shorten the distance and introduce students to different perspectives, broadening their worldview. Such lessons should be based on discussions with students, where they are encouraged to express their views, concerns and doubts freely (Ibidem, p. 47).

Additionally, teachers must be aware that fostering tolerance and respect for diversity in students requires more than just imparting theoretical knowledge about other countries, cultures and customs. It is also necessary to discuss stereotypes and biases in order to teach learners to think critically. Debating differences can lead students to reflect and broaden their worldview, teaching tolerance and mutual respect. Authorities play a significant role in shaping attitudes in young people,

so teachers must manifest highly developed multicultural competencies. The attitudes adopted are relatively fixed and can be challenging to change. Therefore, fostering the right attitudes from early childhood is essential, and multicultural education is necessary. It prepares the individual to live in a culturally diverse society, enhances tolerance and promotes integration (Nikitorowicz, 1995:116-117). Moreover, teachers can become role models for their students. Hence, their contribution to fostering young people's positive attitudes toward diversity is crucial.

The educational impact is inseparable from the authority of the teacher. It is effective when the educator becomes a significant person for the student. Then counselling, punishing or rewarding, as well as other educational interactions, will become effective. Teachers can use their authority to help their students develop multicultural competencies and foster positive attitudes toward diversity. Educators must be consistent with their worldview to promote positive mindsets effectively. Only if a teacher is open-minded and respectful towards people from other cultures will they be able to convey such values to their students. What is more, educators should be culturally aware and constantly develop their knowledge, skills, and competencies to function consciously in a multicultural society. It will enable them to communicate effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds, keep an open mind and broaden their worldview (Kulikowska, 2022:446-447).

Furthermore, teachers, as people in a position of authority, are closely watched by their learners, who quickly recognise the teachers' actual attitudes toward multiculturalism. Based on the behaviour of educators and the signals they give out, their students can quickly identify whether their views coincide with the content they teach. If they are divergent, this will lead to dissonance in the students, consequently weakening their trust in the teacher. As a result, the subsequent educational impact will be hampered. Hence, teachers must work on their beliefs to avoid harmful stereotypes and prejudices. Trust in the teacher is necessary to foster tolerance and cultural awareness among students.

It is worth noting that attitude structures include *"three essential components – cognitive, emotional, and behavioural – expressed in knowledge, emotions, and behaviour"* (Ibidem, p. 448). Regarding the cognitive component, providing students with thorough multicultural knowledge is crucial. Such learning can make students appreciate the immense value of cultural diversity. Nevertheless, having information about different countries and their customs is not enough. Teaching students about the harmfulness and falsity of stereotypes and prejudices towards individuals or social groups is necessary. Such wisdom can push students to rethink and analyse their worldview and approach to diversity and, if necessary, replace erroneous views with the right ones in line with the acquired knowledge.

When discussing multiculturalism, it is vital to address the issue of discrimination, which can negatively impact minority groups. This problem is based on improper and harmful treatment of those discriminated against. It may

happen based on ethnicity, nationality, and race⁴. Discrimination is ubiquitous, so teachers must respond appropriately to any manifestation of it. In such a situation, educators should clearly explain to learners that such behaviour is unacceptable and carries serious consequences. Pointing out an alternative socially acceptable behaviour to students is also vital. Additionally, it is beneficial for teachers to provide learners with positive examples and refer to familiar situations. It is also essential to address the emotional component of the attitude, encouraging students to develop compassion and empathise with the discriminated person (Ibidem, p. 449).

What is also worth mentioning, it is beneficial to encourage learners to reflect on inappropriate actions and strategise how to behave correctly. It is also worth referring to intercultural sensitivity, which requires responsibility, empathy and equal treatment when communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds. Multicultural education can help in fostering such an attitude among young people. Nonetheless, it requires an intended effort and dedication from teachers. The authority figure must encourage cultural relativism among the young people. It is based on trying to explain and comprehend the behaviour of others, taking into account their culture. This approach is founded on respect and understanding towards the differences in verbal and non-verbal communication styles and the dialogue of cultures. It is considered an element of multicultural competencies, essential for coexistence in a diverse society.

Educators may also face difficulties while teaching international students. These individuals have special educational needs and require support from teachers to acclimate to the school community. They may struggle with unpleasant experiences or traumas related to leaving home and migrating. They also often experience culture shock. It can be defined as "*a psychosomatic functioning disorder caused by prolonged contact with a different, unfamiliar culture, perceiving significant differences in functioning in one's own and the new culture*" (Chrzanowska, Jachimczak, 2019:90).

Culture shock is accompanied by anxiety; international students may not understand the behaviour and expectations of others towards them, which can be a source of frustration. Cultural differences manifest themselves in different behaviour patterns, which can negatively affect the relationship and slow down the process of acclimatisation to the new environment. At this stage, newcomers' idealised expectations often clash with reality, which can cause negative emotions. Therefore, teachers should support the integration process by helping learners acclimatise to the new environment while maintaining their identity. International students should not be required to abandon their culture, beliefs or customs, as this is incompatible with fundamental human rights. Integration, on the other hand, is a multicultural approach and benefits all school community members (Ibidem, pp. 90-91).

⁴ <https://bip.mkidn.gov.pl/pages/koordynator-do-spraw-rownego-traktowania/czym-jest-dyskryminacja-i-rowne-traktowanie.php>, [accessed: 18.10.2023.].

Undoubtedly, the teacher's role in multicultural education is crucial. They should support the integration of international learners and consider their unique situation and special educational needs. As authority figures, they can positively influence students' perspectives and behaviour, spreading tolerance and respect for cultural diversity. Thus, teachers must expand their competencies and combat stereotypes and prejudices.

Ukrainian students in Polish schools

It is worth noticing that international students are also refugees who should be provided psychological and pedagogical assistance as they have special educational needs⁵. Due to the outbreak of war, approximately 150,000 Ukrainian students are now attending schools in Poland (CEO, 2023:2)⁶. Such learners require particular attention and support from the entire school community.

Over the past year, many measures have been taken to support refugee students from Ukraine. The Polish school openly welcomed them, trying to meet their needs. The Centre for Civic Education (CEO) has taken many steps to help educators work with new students. More than 50,000 teachers have benefited from such assistance. As part of a project that supports schools hosting refugees, the CEO surveyed Ukrainian students to understand their difficulties better and address the tensions that arise in school communities due to the situation. The research shows what has changed attitudes toward multiculturalism in Polish schools and identifies the most effective solutions to support integration (Ibidem, pp. 2-3).

Despite emerging tensions, the situation in Polish schools is beginning to stabilise. Teachers feel more prepared to work with Ukrainian students and, as a result, are more confident in their qualifications. Over time, there has been a greater emphasis on assimilation, often leading to the exclusion of individuals with difficulty adjusting. Many of them leave schools, which is facilitated by the still high mobility of refugees. Teachers' attitudes have also changed, avoiding special treatment for Ukrainian students to return to normalcy and adapting educational requirements and grading criteria to the general student. It is also an attempt to motivate learners to work actively. Teachers are trying to standardise their approach, focusing on the positive implementation of the core curriculum. It is worth noting that social assistance and support in learning the Polish language are still maintained. Nevertheless, returning to normalcy is a natural consequence

⁵ *Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 9 sierpnia 2017 r. w sprawie warunków organizowania kształcenia, wychowania i opieki dla dzieci i młodzieży niepełnosprawnych, niedostosowanych społecznie i zagrożonych niedostosowaniem społecznym (Dz.U. 2017 poz. 1578); <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20170001578>, [accessed: 20.10.2023.].*

⁶ https://ceo.org.pl/wpcontent/uploads/2023/09/Report_Refugee_Students_In_Polish_Schools_CEO_09_2023.pdf, [accessed: 20.10.2023.].

of the progressive integration process and the departure of non-integrated individuals from schools (Ibidem, pp. 20-21).

Ukrainian students usually perceive Polish schools positively. They appreciate the good atmosphere, the openness and friendliness of teachers, engaging in extracurricular activities and school trips, and the opportunity to learn the Polish language. Nevertheless, they point out that they are overloaded with learning and face difficulties understanding certain subjects due to language barriers. Although they rate Polish schools as tolerant and giving space for self-expression, they encounter xenophobic behaviour from Polish students. On the other hand, there has been an increase in frustration and anger among Polish students and teachers, who expect the Ukrainian students to have made more progress in their fluency in the Polish language and integration into the school community, arguing that enough time has passed for them to adapt to the new environment. Frequently, they do not understand why their expectations are unfulfilled and see Ukrainian students as ungrateful and taking advantage of their privileged position (Ibidem, pp. 22-24).

Knowledge of the Polish language is crucial in the integration process, students' educational success and social development. It has been observed that Ukrainian students have mastered the Polish language to varying degrees. The number of additional hours of Polish is sufficient for most of the learners, but many students do not take full advantage of them, and as a result, it is more difficult for them to master the language. The level of fluency also depends on the student's predisposition, parents' approach to education and plans for further schooling. Nonetheless, teachers notice a correlation between Ukrainian students' attendance at Polish classes and their language development, thus building positive relationships with their peers (Ibidem, pp. 37-39).

It is worth noting that Polish students' attitudes vary. Some of them are friendly and positive, openly inviting classmates from Ukraine to their circles. Nonetheless, harmful and even hostile attitudes towards diversity are also clearly visible. Indifference can also often be seen. Polish students frequently feel that they are mistreated, which leads to disagreements. They usually notice favouritism of Ukrainian students by teachers, which is evident in grading and their approach to school rules. Conflicts are often caused by differences in character as well. On the other hand, teachers and staff say that disputes between students are not ethnically based but result from ordinary animosities. Nevertheless, it has been noted that xenophobic narratives are emerging among students, which parental attitudes may influence. It is vital to take steps to foster tolerance, as ignoring manifestations of discrimination based on nationality can lead to the perpetuation of stereotypes and exacerbate conflicts (Ibidem, p. 86).

High-quality multicultural education is crucial. It is also necessary to improve teaching staff qualifications to prepare educators to deal with conflict situations, manage culturally diverse groups and prevent discriminatory actions. Nevertheless, when supporting students from different cultures, teachers should ensure that all students are treated equally, regardless of their background (Ibidem, p. 92).

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