

## **A Teacher Facing the Challenges of the Multiculturalism: Theoretical Basis of the Matter and the Practical Problems of the Profession - Polish Experience and the Global Exemplification**

Marcelina Szumer – Atilgan

ul. Namysłowska 2a/47  
03-454 Warszawa  
marcelina.szumer@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** Multicultural diversity of communities affects teachers work in many ways. I will try to explain what factors (stereotypes, language and postmodern philosophy of teaching) impact the work of the teacher in multicultural reality. As a journalist writing about an educational system and an expert working for the Polish Minister of Education I will explain how the new Polish school programs, the European Union directives, and all types of migration changed the way of learning and learning managing. I will also show how many foreigner children are in Polish educational system, and how school should help them and their parents. Is it possible in situation, when there are no experts engaging multiculturalism, who could teach teachers how they should work with multicultural classes, and organize the work the in various learning environment?

### **1. Introduction**

Teacher's job from the beginning of institution of school is connecting with peoples. Sharing the knowledge, is not the simple talking, there is always some kind of feedback. The student's emotions, feelings, different experience, and different environment – all those things affect teachers and the teaching process. It is obvious, that in multicultural community those differences are even bigger than in the past, when the people in classroom were more similar, undifferentiated. Now, when – because of many reasons - people move, changing their countries the teachers' job seems to be more difficult than ever before.

The people who relocated, take their own culture to their new homes, children take it from homes to schools. A culture is complicated structure of believes, faiths, religious, stereotypes, the culture is something what determines who we are. We all differ from each other; have evolved different features and behaviors, as well as different ways of learning. In the past some people lived separately, fearing their differences, but now multicultural mix is being formed before our very eyes. If, repeating after Marian Golka [1], "multiculturalism is a conscious co-existence in the same space of two or more groups with different cultural characteristics, contributing to the mutual perceptions of otherness with different effects - from antagonism and conflict to fully acceptance and actions " we all agree that it has become a fact in almost all aspects of life. It's also happened thanks to mass media, global economy, e-mails, websites. It is obvious that in this reality, education and knowledge no longer can be treated as something universal, timeless, something what is essential. The modernistic 19<sup>th</sup> century discourse about education, not even mentioned about the multiculturalism, presupposed- what accentuates Zbyszko Melosik [2] - that school knowledge has

got a neutral character. It exists out of the history or politics, and the lack of the access to it is equal to the lack of the “civilization”. All was clear and lucid at that subject, the division for what is, and what isn't an education content - clear, and teacher - omniscient. The need of changes in the curriculum, in the approach for education during the period of multiculturalism seems to be social necessity.

## **2. Change of education thinking**

Let's turn back to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The great social revolutions and the rapid educational and technical progress could not have any influence on the way of thinking about human being and the world. An interesting metaphor of the Modernism used by (from Detlev Peukert) Bogdan Baran [3], who compared working of the modernism society with the highway: channelized the traffic, confined its speed, and indicated the places of turns and entrances, in exchange for the maximal effectiveness.

It is easy to guess what kind of impress on the education was made by the modernistic credence in the possibility of getting to the universal truth about human and the world with simultaneously devaluation of everything what is not in tune of canon. The unification of views, knowledge, education and mind dominance give credence that all people were equipped in the same cognitional contents. Graded science knowledge placed thinking about human in the rigid frames, labeled the appropriate label and lay it off in a peaceful belief, that it was made the next step to moral advance and social justice.

We can't longer say about the only right truths, life styles, styles of thinking and actions, cognitional styles and styles of learning, when society is so composite.

Social changes are the reason of creating the philosophy called postmodernism.

Philosophers such as Jean Francois Lyotard and Richard Rorty [4] accented, that none of way of thinking is universal, but dependent on the culture, and language.

In that situation how can we think that school is a place pure, clean and isolated? School become the area of various views, thinking currents, confessions and ways of functioning. None of these cannot be discredit by teachers.

## **3. Language as an carrier of culture**

Let's start our considerations about Polish school from the language side. Children going to school in the new country sometimes know, but in the most cases they just start to learn new language. At homes, with parents they still use own languages.

And that can be the first big problem for the teachers. Why? Because language not only expresses the culture, but somehow also projects it. Edward Sapir [6] thinks that the participants of the culture had never lived in an "objective" world of actions and events. Human thought is determined by the language "calques" and the customs of the group. Benjamin Lee Whorf [6], goes in this reflection even further representing the view regarded by other linguists as extremely deterministic. He claims that if two languages differ from each other significantly, the understanding between their users is virtually impossible. The meaning of individual words is always subject to the context of a situation in which these words are spoken.

Culture, as we have seen, is determined by language; it interprets the same events differently, depending on where we come from.

American researcher Joan Miller [7] asked a group of Hindus and a group of Americans to judge the

same article. This was a short note about a driver who after the crash, in which his passenger suffered, left him in the hospital and returned to work without asking doctors about the health of the injured. Moral judgments made by the representatives of different cultures differed from each other radically. Almost 40 % of Americans attributed this behavior to the characteristics of the driver, claiming, that he was irresponsible and hungry for his own success. Only 17 % decided that his behavior had other causes. 40 % of Hindus claimed that the context was the decisive factor - the driver had his duties and it was obvious that he had to return to work. Only 15% represented the opinion, that the behavior of the driver was determined by his character. These are things which the teachers functioning in a multicultural world should be aware of.

#### **4. Different ways of learning**

Psychological studies confirm that the culture to large extent determines how we learn. What is more – they prove that the most of differences, such as differences in school performance between children from different cultural backgrounds, earlier attributed to the racial differences in reality are determined by the culture. At the beginning of the 80's Gert Hofstede suggested to diverse cultures into individualistic and collectivistic ones. Western culture can be classified as the individualistic culture, with an individual person in the centre of the interest. The personal set of goals is put higher than those of the whole group. Self-reliance and independence is very important in this culture.

Representatives of Eastern cultures (for example Japanese) came from collectivist culture. The reference point of view is always from them to others, and the overriding goals of the group. The behavior and functioning in the society is more important than the group norm. The collectivistic culture is also more sensitive to the context of situations, not only to result.

Less than a decade ago, researchers discovered that the representatives of collectivist cultures remember, categorize and draw attention to different parts of speech otherwise than the representatives of the individualistic culture. One experiment consisted in the fact that if Japanese and American children were invited to choose two of three pictures that form a common category. The presents a woman, a man and a child. Americans felt that one category make up a woman and a man, or adults. Japanese children performed the same task differently. They chose the pictures of woman and child, because frequently woman takes care of the child. Also Twila from the University of Michigan showed that English-speaking children know more nouns, so they faster learn to categorize objects. The representatives of the Eastern cultures pay more attention to verbs, so their children more quickly determine the activities. [7]. Is it not the challenge for the teacher?

#### **5. International experience**

First experience with the management of multiculturalism in the education was - almost everywhere - nothing more, than assimilation policy. Yes, we recognize the representatives of other cultures, but above all we want to make them similar to us. Official: to help them adapt to the dominant culture.

Except home, school is the most important place for creating attitudes. It should prepare students not only to respect the rights and dignity of the representatives of other cultures, but also the understanding the different needs of students from different cultural backgrounds. Unfortunately many teachers still believe that the best way of teaching and thinking is assimilation.

The intention of assimilation was (and still is) helping immigrants to adapt to the new society. In practice, the notion of assimilation is patronizing and not accepting the attitude towards other cultures and lifestyles. The cultural pluralism is that, what is needed; a system that accepts and welcomes the fact existing some distinction in the lifestyles and cultures. British scientist [8] realizes, that assimilation "didn't work" so good as everybody expected. The second or third generation Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims, share many interests and aspirations of the "original

British” students, but they are also determined to keep their relation with their parental cultures (However fact, that many teenager girls who do not want to get married with their Afghan or Pakistan cousins chosen by parents, inform the British police or children rights organizations shows also the pluses of “western” education system).

The same situation is in Germany. Our western neighbors opened the market for workers from abroad (mainly Turks) about 40 years ago; However, Germans were judging that the stay of workers will be shorten. That's why their multicultural policy was nothing more than “pedagogy for foreigners”, which role was to prepare them for a temporary functioning in the German realities.

The result? Separate classes (sometimes even schools) which are not strive for integration and they do not give opportunities to explore and learn the mutual respect.

Even small Iceland, where almost 8 % of the population are immigrants (the biggest group - from Poland), has problems with the multicultural educations. Elsa Sigríður Jónsdóttir and Hanna Ragnarsdóttir noticed: “Neither policy nor national curriculum guides refer particularly to multicultural society, multicultural or intercultural education. Implementations of equity principles are not clear in the curriculum guides. These facts leave schools at all levels with little guidance regarding how to implement multicultural education and even less encouragement to do so.” [9].

## 6. Multiculturalism in Polish school

Krystyna Bleszyńska [10] from the Warsaw University, the author of the report entitled “Foreigner children in Polish educational establishments” has checked from what countries foreign children in Polish schools came from. Most of them are from Ukraine and Russia but there are also Iraqis, Iranians, Yemenis, Lebanese, Turkish, Syrians, Germans, Italians, French and Tatars. Polish law [11] gives all of them, even when their parents are in Poland illegal, right for education. The problem is, those Polish schools do not have a lot of to offer them even though many of them do not know Polish when they start polish school. That is why many of them are located in lower classes. If they do not manage with learning, the teachers should not give them F grade or – what often happened - ignore them. If they do this, the foreign child will be “pushed” from class to class or will spend two or more years in the same class.

Polish lessons should not be organized after normal classes; in such situation children, who usually live far from schools (for example in a refugee center) are not be able to reach on class.

The contact with their parents is even more difficult; they simply do not show up at the teachers – parents meetings. Some of them don’t want, some of them don’t care, many of them can’t communicate with teachers because they don’t know how (again-language barrier).

How to change this situation, and how to change polish schools? The most important issue which should be done is realization of the most important tasks of the multicultural education. Scientist [1] mentions that these are:

- > Promoting the ability to understand the social world.
- > Promoting pluralism and learning to perceive relationships, interdependence and respect for other cultures, lifestyles and values
- > Giving a positive value of cultural differences.
- > Realizing that the views represented by the representatives of different cultures are not universal.
- > Promoting confidence in interpersonal relations.

Additionally, the international reports [12] mention about the important role of multicultural education. For example report prepare by the UNESCO in 1998 emphasizes the role of the education as an engine of social change, peace, freedom and social justice. The European Report (1997) mentions about learning groups including multicultural environment; Federico Mayor's report (2001) talks about the role which can be play by every culture or community in global education system.

Let's check how polish school programs carry out these tasks.

## **6. School programs: for everybody or for Polish students?**

In 2008 Polish Parliament accepted new programs for all kind of schools. The document described what, how and in what range children have to be educated on every particular levels of education. It has been- in author's mind- an answer to the modern requirements. Unfortunately, it is easy to get impression, that multicultural contents are added in the last moment without deeper reflection. Subject of the multiculturalism is treated in a new program base in subsidiary way and it is not implemented on a wide range, it is not included in the teacher training program (maybe except of pedagogical departments). In the result, there are not exists any experts engaging multiculturalism, who could teach the teachers how they have to function in the multicultural classes, and also how to teach the foreigner's children; how to organize work in various learning environment and how to help to get on with children, whose educational chances at the beginning are worse than their Polish classmates.

Good thing is, that after the reform, the school programs do not explain how (and what) to teach, but say about the skills which every student should possess after particular classes. It gives teachers more freedom and more opportunity to organize classes in modern way. Also the schools books, which often were full of stereotypes and subjects which can be understand only by students from Polish culture, recently they are not so important anymore.

The new institution in Polish educational system is "teacher's assistant". His job is to support the teacher during lesson with foreign child, alleviate and prevent presumptive conflicts proceed from cultural differences, do duty as a middleman between school and parents. This idea applied in Iceland, Spain or the Netherlands; in Poland is exists mostly on the paper. There is not enough money for hiring these assistants, the rules and conditions of their work are not clear, and their employing is only a possibility, not a duty. [13]

## **7. Multiculturalism in school programs – examples.**

For purposes of this study I chose "The Social Knowledge" course. It is probably only one course that clearly relate to contemporary social and cultural realities. This course starts after the primary school and is continued till the end of the high school. There is more than 200 topics divided into 31 section (family, state, national, government, community). Unfortunately only few of them are related (usually not straight) to multiculturalism. The others completely ignore the issue, or - even worse - promote the intercultural stereotypes.

How is that possible? Let's take a look at "The Social Knowledge" in the middle school program. Authors expect, that after course student should:

- explain what are the social and community divisions
- explain what is the tolerance/intolerance
- explain how a person becomes a citizen in a formal sense (law of the land, the law of blood, citizenship)
- give examples how citizens can influence the decisions of the authorities at the local, national, European and global levels

- explain what it means to be a Pole (or a member of another national community)
- explain what the difference between national, ethnic is and immigrant groups
- be open to different point of views
- be able to work in diverse groups
- present basic ways to solve conflict in a group and between groups
- know what is patriotism, nationalism and cosmopolitanism
- present the main directions of Polish foreign policy

We must agree that those skills are “multicultural friendly”. Unfortunately, in this program there are also “multicultural enemies”, for example:

- student knows how to keep distance, when he or she does not approve some groups or their behaviors
- student can explain problems of young Poles
- student can recognize some social roles and expectations [14].

As we can see, some of topics can help to create an open minded community but some of them are still presented in the stereotypical way. We have to have in mind that realization of that program always depends on teacher...

## **7. Summary**

The aim of the following essay was not to show ready-made solutions. I have only tried to show the areas, in which the multicultural issues should be taken into the consideration during the teaching and communicating processes with a “stranger”.

Teachers have to remember, that the culture to large extent determines how we learn, how we think, how we solve problems, how we build friendships and how we work in a team.

It is still a lot of to do, but it will be unfair not to show good examples. Many NGO’s organizations and even some teachers implemented their own programs of multicultural lessons by themselves. For example, between 2009-2011 the Education Office of the capital city - Warsaw organized project for children, their parents and teachers. The teachers learned how to work in the multicultural classes. The foreign parents started meetings in the Parents Supporting Group. In the project there were also help for children and “Welcoming package for students and parents” in five languages: English, Chechen, Russian, Ukrainian and Vietnamese. I believe that these small steps finally will help to change the Polish schools and will make them “multicultural friendly”.

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