



Intercultural Education as a Chance for the Integration of Refugee Children

SUMMARY

This article sheds light on the relevance of intercultural education for the integration of refugee children. Modern man has witnessed immense changes with the rise of globalization, migration, refugee emigration, all of which implicate the growth of national multi-ethnicity and associated issues of multi-cultural society. In order to avoid the conflicts resulting from societies' heterogeneous structure, each society requires an infusion of knowledge and education directed toward attitudes of openness to cultural differences. An important part of this process belongs to the Polish school system, not only in educating, but also upbringing. The author of this publication provides an example of intercultural education in practice, built on the experience of a small elementary school with Chechen refugee children. Highlighted in this example is the integration practice "step after step," aimed at strengthening ties and building positive relationships.

KEYWORDS – INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION, REFUGEE, INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES

Edukacja międzykulturowa szansą na integrowanie dzieci uchodźców

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł przybliży istotę i znaczenie edukacji międzykulturowej w procesie integrowania dzieci uchodźców. Współczesny człowiek jest świadkiem zachodzących i nieuniknionych zmian typu: globalizacja, migracja, uchodźstwo, które implikują wzrastającą liczbę wieloetniczności państw i z tym związane problemy wielokulturowości. Aby zapobiec konfliktom wynikającym ze struktury heterogenicznych społeczeństw, należy upowszechniać wiedzę i edukować społeczeństwo w kierunku postaw otwartości wobec odmienności kulturowych. Istotne zadanie w wymienionym

procesie ma do wykonania Polska szkoła, nie tylko w obszarze edukacji, ale i wychowania. Autorka artykułu podaje przykład realizacji edukacji międzykulturowej w praktyce na przykładzie małej szkoły podstawowej, w której uczą się dzieci uchodźców z Czeczenii. Szczególnie mocno został podkreślony sposób integrowania „krok po kroku”, który utrwala więzi i buduje pozytywne relacje.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE – EDUKACJA MIĘDZYKULTUROWA, UCHODŹCA,
INTEGRACJA UCHODŹCÓW

Globalisation, migration, exile, the increasing multi-ethnicity of countries are the phenomena of the times. They, in turn, cause the problem of interculturalism that is the coexistence of different values within a single country. The intermingling of cultures leads to a number of conflicts and misunderstandings. This forces modern research to draw attention to new, hitherto unknown areas of studies. One such area is that of refugees. The reason for exploring the above issue is the recently established centre for foreigners applying for refugee status in Biała Podlaska.

The main contemporary problems include the lack of hierarchy of values and the decreasing role of spiritual values in favour of material ones. They lead to a situation in which societies live with a sense of temporariness.¹ Nikitorowicz indicates that in an era of globalization, intercultural education plays an important role. Through dialogue, cooperation, understanding and negotiation, intercultural education promotes mutual respect and sensitivity towards people of a different nationality, culture and religion.² Lewowicki holds the same position indicating that “intercultural education should promote new attitudes towards other people and cultures.”³ Thus, it can promote not only mutual enrichment of cultures, but most of all common systems of values and their transmission between cultures.

¹ Cf. Z. Melosik, T. Szkudlarek, *Kultura tożsamości i edukacja. Migotanie znaczeń*, Kraków 1998, p. 76.

² Cf. J. Nikitorowicz, *Od podmiotowości do międzykulturowości i z powrotem. Próba interpretacji niektórych perspektyw teoretycznych*, in: *W poszukiwaniu teorii przydatnych w badaniach międzykulturowych*, eds. T. Lewowicki, E. Ogrodzka-Mazur, Cieszyn 2001, p. 17.

³ T. Lewowicki, *Szkic do teorii zachowań tożsamościowych*, in: *W poszukiwaniu teorii przydatnych w badaniach międzykulturowych*, op. cit., p. 17.

The ongoing process of globalization, to a large extent, creates many educational opportunities. Societies are becoming more aware of inequalities in the access to education, which distort the social function of the educational system. The main goal of intercultural education, which is treated as a tool for supporting the development of society, is to overcome barriers, fears, prejudices and stereotypes within a multicultural society.

While discussing the issue of interculturalism, the importance of dialogue increases, implying understanding, agreement, co-existence.⁴ It occurs where communities have a common denominator e.g. exchange of information or negotiations. Dialogue requires such values as kindness, trust, understanding, self-esteem and responsibility for shaping common aims, content, rules, norms and values. It cannot take place without mutual tolerance, openness and courage.⁵

The aims of intercultural education

In the last decade, Poland was a country with a limited degree of occurrence and disclosure of multiculturalism. The collapse of communism led to the discovery of cultural diversity and an exuberant regeneration of the aspirations of national and ethnic groups residing in Poland: Romani, people, Lithuanians, Belarusians, Germans and others. The opening of borders resulted in the migration of different groups: as immigrants, refugees, migrant workers, etc. Therefore, the question arises whether we are prepared to live together with people of other cultural identities. The education system is one of the many factors that determine conditions and the development of this coexistence.

Scholars from the Department of Intercultural Education, the Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology, at the University of Białystok prepared the main aims of intercultural education. These are as followed:

- creating awareness about the equivalence of all cultures, preparing individuals, regardless of their origin and culture, for a harmonious life in a pluralistic society;

⁴ Cf. J. Nikitorowicz, *Edukacja regionalna i międzykulturowa*, Warszawa 2009, p. 269.

⁵ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 279.

- increasing sensitivity to “otherness,” different cultural roots, traditions, shaping attitudes of openness and tolerance, renouncing a sense of cultural superiority in favor of dialogue and exchange of values;
- recognizing “otherness” and perceiving it as an enrichment and inspiration, interesting and absorbing, not threatening or hostile;
- raising awareness of cultural identity, increasing self-esteem, safety, and self-acceptance;
- developing skills for solving problems related to prejudice, negative stereotypes, etc.⁶

Intercultural education is a form of response, a challenge to the existence of multiculturalism. Openness to other people, groups of “others” and their issues is an important feature of intercultural education. It is intended to support mutual recognition and integration. The aims that face intercultural education were further described by Wojakowski. According to the author, the phenomenon of multiculturalism sets two types of aims for education. The first goal includes the guarantee of equality for a particular ethnic group, its preparation for life in a given society, transmission and cultivation of its language and culture. The second objective focuses on ensuring good coexistence between a dominant culture and ethnic minorities.⁷

Intercultural education and refugee children

In this paper, the phenomenon of intercultural education will be presented in the example of refugee children. The emotional problem of refugees has been present for thousands of years.

The decision to enter the “refugee path” is usually forced by external factors, mainly related to suffering, pain, war, persecution and threat to life. Many people associate the term “refugee” with a person who has experienced some type of trauma. Poland has only provided legal protection to refugees consistent with international standards since the beginning of the nineties.

⁶ Cf. K. Karwowski, *Jedność w różnorodności*, „Edukacja i Dialog”, 177 (2006), p. 135.

⁷ Cf. D. Wojakowski, *Wielokulturowość pogranicza*, Kraków 2002, p. 124.

September 27th 1991, was a turning point in Polish refugee policy when it became party to the Geneva Convention of 1951 and the New York Protocol of 1967, and therefore adopted international obligations to protect asylum seekers. The Geneva Convention specifies who a refugee is, in order to introduce the same understanding of this term in all signatory countries. According to the 1951 Convention, a refugee is a person who has left his home country due to fear of persecution on the basis of race, religion, political opinion or nationality.⁸

Polish legislation provides refugees with the following forms of legal protection: refugee status, subsidiary protection (since 2008), tolerated residence permit (since 2003), asylum and holiday protection. In practice, refugee status and subsidiary protection are the most common. The former is granted to those who meet the criteria of the Convention, while subsidiary protection is granted to foreigners who do not fulfill the requirements for refugee status but are exposed to threats in their home countries e.g. death penalty, tortures, inhuman treatment, serious threat to health and life.⁹

The integration of refugees and the host society is one of the most important aspects of an intercultural society. However, there are no clear guidelines which specify what the process of integration should look like, or indicators which would assess whether the process is successful or not. Many definitions focus only on some requirements that refugees must meet in order to consider them integrated into the host society, very often ignoring the great role of the local community in this process.¹⁰

The UNHCR has adopted one of several approaches that emphasize the need for cooperation between refugees and the host society.¹¹ According to this approach, the integration is

⁸ The 1951 Convention related to the Status of Refugees, Art. 1.

⁹ The Act of granting protection to foreigners within the territory of the Republic of Poland, 13 June 2003, Art. 3 and Art. 15, Journal of Laws No. 128, item 1175.

¹⁰ Cf. H. Grzymała-Moszczyńska, *Uchodźcy – podręcznik dla osób pracujących z uchodźcami*, Kraków 2000, p. 24.

¹¹ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – UNHCR – a position established in accordance with the resolution 319 (IV) adopted by the UN General Assembly, 3 December 1949; the status of the UNHCR was established with the resolution of the UN General Assembly No. 428 (V), 14 December 1950. UNHCR's mandate is to provide international protection to refugees and find

a dynamic, multidimensional, two-way process that requires effort from all its participants. It should be based on the willingness of refugees to adapt to the host society without denying their own cultural identity, and the same willingness of the host community and its public institutions to accept refugees and meet the needs of the heterogeneous society.

Such integration should be pursued in legal, socio-economic and cultural dimensions. It should be measured by the ability of the foreigner to function independently in the host country as well as the willingness of the host community to support this process.

According to Polish law, the integration of refugees begins with receiving a decision to grant one of the forms of protection within the Republic of Poland after leaving the refugee centre. The Individual Integration Programmes, that provide the social assistance, aims to help foreigners in the difficult process of integration. It is granted for a period not longer than 12 months. It is addressed mainly to foreigners who have been granted refugee status or subsidiary protection.

If refugees cannot return to their home country, the best solution for them is to integrate in the country that grants them asylum. The integration is based on the assumption that refugees can be useful members of society. The exile divests people of their material possessions, but not their knowledge, skills or experience. Apart from exceptional situations, refugees want to live like others – work and educate their children. Material support is very important after arriving in a foreign country. However, this support should also include: learning the language, customs and culture of the host country as well as gaining professional qualifications required to start work.¹² These actions, undoubtedly more difficult and less tangible than material support, are extremely important to make the period of aid dependency as short as possible. Some time in the refugee centre is necessary, however staying too long may lead to inaction and apathy.

It is a common phenomenon that whole families flee the countries which are plunged into wars and in which their inhabitants are persecuted. One of the most frequently mentioned reasons

durable solutions to the problem of refugees through the voluntary repatriations or assimilation in the new national societies.

¹² The Social Assistance Act of 12 March 2004, Art. 92, “Journal of Laws” No. 64, item 593.

for leaving the home country is to seek a better life for their children. At least half of the total number of refugees (that is 25 million) are children. They are deprived of their own country, home, even family. They are children without a childhood; orphaned or abandoned, devoid of a sense of security.¹³

The education of refugee children is very important. For those who have traumatic experiences, regular school attendance is one of the best ways to return to normal life. Thanks to daily contacts with other children and their ability to acquire language, they integrate with the host society faster than their parents. They are guides for older generations of refugees. This shows that full integration with the host country is possible only in the second generation. This includes refugees who came to a foreign country as children or were born in it.¹⁴

Despite the fact that the number of foreigners applying for refugee status has increased in Poland, many Polish schools do not discuss this problem with their pupils. Refugees become part of Polish society. There is a need to promote awareness regarding the situation of refugees in Poland as well as to shape the attitude of openness to new members of society. School institutions should play an important role in shaping an attitude of respect for other traditions and cultures. At the same time, they should take appropriate action to prevent acts of discrimination and to teach tolerance and acceptance towards people of other races and religions.¹⁵

Polish schools that work in a multicultural environment on a daily basis, face the problem of refugees. Children of refugees are subject to compulsory education and are entitled to free education. However, they often have poor attendance at classes or simply leave the school. They usually face problems with the Polish school system which is not adapted to their educational needs. What is more, Polish teachers do not have the adequate preparation for running intercultural classes. Refugee children lack the habits of learning and systematic preparation for lessons.

¹³ Cf. M. Malczewska, *Uchodźcy – broszura informacyjna*, Poznań 2001, p. 26.

¹⁴ Cf. K. Koszewska, *Zrozumieć innych, czyli jak uczyć o uchodźcach*, Warszawa 2001, p. 10.

¹⁵ The core curriculum for preschool and general education in particular types of schools, 23 December 2008, "Journal of Laws" No. 4, item 17.

The language barrier is another important problem. Many refugees have a poor knowledge of Polish and in many cases know only their mother tongue. Consequently, they have learning difficulties and do not participate in extracurricular activities offered by the school. In many schools, cultural differences and a poor knowledge of Polish are the major causes of isolation of refugee children from peer groups. In addition, discrimination against foreign cultures often appears in the school environment. It creates unfavorable conditions for the integration process. Refugee children, who apply for refugee status, usually come from a more conservative community than the Polish one and profess a different religion. The school should try to accept cultural differences and the needs of its pupils. At the same time, teachers, pupils and their parents should respect this diversity.¹⁶

Intercultural education plays a great role in preparing children to accept different cultures. This kind of education aims to raise awareness among young people and that despite cultural, ethnic or religious differences, people can integrate and live together. The most important principle of intercultural society is to “stay together” and never “beside.”

The main aim of intercultural education is to teach young people to understand the diversity of cultures, enabling them to establish dialogue. Its additional goals include shaping attitudes of openness and tolerance in young people towards refugees and developing good communication with them. The institution of school plays a crucial role in this process as its educational system is responsible for preparing students to live in an intercultural society.

Refugee children of the primary school in Zalesie Commune

Many scholars agree that proper education is very important for the future of refugee children. It gives them a chance to resume a normal life and strengthen the integration of the whole refugee community. However, sending refugee children to Polish schools is not enough to solve the problem of poor integration.

¹⁶ Cf. A. Kosowicz, *Uchodźca*, in: *Uchodźca mój dobry sąsiad*, ed. P. Dziliński, Warszawa 2009, pp. 49-50.

The primary school in Berezówka, in Zalesie Commune of Lublin Province, runs an international class. Its pupils are children of Polish origin and children from the Centre of the Office for Foreigners, near Biała Podlaska. They mostly come from Chechnya, but also from Armenia, Kazakhstan and Ingushetia. The school has 83 pupils of which 36 are refugee children. Both, Polish and refugee children cause the same behavioural problems. Often refugee children take on the behaviour of Polish children as they spend a great deal of time together. The language barrier appears at the very beginning of intercultural education. However, refugee children very quickly learn how to read and write in Polish, making the barrier no longer a matter of concern. They are fast learners who after some time understand Polish very well, though in some situations they prefer to pretend that they do not understand. They hope that they and their families will stay in Poland. They often say: "my life is here now," "I want to live and work here."

The first class of primary school is a group of nine pupils that consists of only two Polish children and the rest are Chechens. Some refugee children are older than their Polish classmates due to the fact that their level of education is insufficient for higher classes. Sometimes they have problems with simple mathematical calculations, reading and writing. The class is run by a tutor who has a difficult task of running lessons, games and plays in the intercultural environment. The teacher makes special preparations for working in a culturally diverse school by studying the culture, religion, traditions and customs of the Chechen people. The school conducts classes in Polish studies for the refugee children. The attendance of this class is very high as refugee children and their parents are very interested in Polish studies.

They learn Polish at different speeds, depending on their overall development. The teacher, if is necessary, spends more time with children who need more attention and help to learn Polish. Apart from Polish,, the teacher also speaks Russian, which is known by most Chechen children, in order to make communication easier.

An interview conducted with the teacher showed that both Polish and Chechen children do not know much about their colleagues' culture. At the beginning of the school year, the school carries out familiarization classes for all pupils and their teacher. The teacher acquaints Chechen children with Polish culture,

and Polish pupils with Chechen culture. The school authorities try to avoid any actions that could isolate refugee children from Polish pupils. However, cultural differences may have a negative influence on relations within a peer group. Despite good relations in the classroom, refugee children are often reluctant to play with Polish children. That is why the teacher tries to encourage Chechen children to active participation in school life. Teachers do not ask Chechen children about their culture and traditions as they have been acquainted with this information at the beginning of the school year. Tutors are aware of different dress standards in Chechen culture. In particular, this applies to girls who cannot wear shirts with short sleeves. The school canteen prepares meals without pork, and girls and boys cannot sit next to each other in class. Other very important aspects for maintaining good relations with Chechen children is the avoidance eye contact This is regarded as a sign of disrespect and challenge in Chechen culture. In addition, it is seen as unmanly treatment of the 15-year-old Chechen boys, who according to Chechen culture are already men who take care of their families. Thus, too meticulous questioning may not be well received.

Polish children integrate very easily with their Chechen peers, and only in a few situations do they need some help from the teacher. They willingly spend time together, play and make friends. Such integration, step by step, builds positive relations.

Summary

Polish society is becoming more and more heterogeneous. This raises the need to promote knowledge about the problem of refugees and formulate attitudes of openness towards their cultural differences. Polish schools should teach young people to respect values of their own nation, but also and perhaps most importantly, respect and value other cultures. Polish students should grow up to be independent, open, self-confident human beings, who understand that “otherness” does not necessarily mean “strangeness.”¹⁷ The dialogue, which may help to make contact with refugees, should aim to “break down barriers, fears,

¹⁷ K. Stech, B. Ratuś, *Covenants on Human Rights in the process education*, Zielona Góra 1994, p. 12.

prejudices and stereotypes in the spirit of creative coexistence, and not hostility.”¹⁸ Such dialogue is possible if there is a mutually recognized understanding, freedom, equality and respect for diversity, individuality and openness to others. This guarantees good relations between people and the right to be different. Smolińska-Theiss points out that diversity is the wealth of each side of the dialogue and at the same time, the added value in relationship.¹⁹ Contacts with refugees are always difficult, but can be very creative for both sides as encountering the unknown brings new experience. Therefore, the curriculum should include the problem of refugees and promote values of tolerance and openness towards other cultures.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Grzymała-Moszczyńska H., *Uchodźcy – podręcznik dla osób pracujących z uchodźcami*, Zakład Wydawniczy Nomos, Kraków 2000.
- Karwowski K., *Jedność w różnorodności*, „Edukacja i Dialog”, 177 (2006), p. 135.
- Convention related to the Status of Refugees, 28 July 1951, Art. 1.
- Kosowicz A., *Uchodźca*, in: *Uchodźca mój dobry sąsiad*, ed. P. Dziliński, Znak, Warszawa 2009, pp. 49-50.
- Koszevska K., *Zrozumieć innych, czyli jak uczyć o uchodźcach*, CODN Publishing House, Warsaw 2001.
- Lewowicki T., *Szkic do teorii zachowań tożsamościowych*, in: *W poszukiwaniu teorii przydatnych w badaniach międzykulturowych*, eds. T. Lewowicki, E. Ogrodzka-Mazur, University of Silesia in Cieszyn, Cieszyn 2001, p. 17.
- Malczewska M., *Uchodźcy – broszura informacyjna*, Poznań 2001, p. 26.
- Melosik Z., Szkudlarek T., *Kultura tożsamości i edukacja. Migotanie znaczeń*, IMPULS Publishing House, Kraków 1998, p. 76.
- Nikitorowicz J., *Edukacja regionalna i międzykulturowa*, Academic and Professional Publishing, Warszawa 2009, p. 269.
- Nikitorowicz J., *Od podmiotowości do międzykulturowości i z powrotem. Próba interpretacji niektórych perspektyw teoretycznych*, in: *W poszukiwaniu teorii przydatnych w badaniach międzykulturowych*, eds. T. Lewowicki, E. Ogrodzka-Mazur, University of Silesia in Cieszyn, Cieszyn 2001, p. 17.
- Smolińska-Theiss B., *Dzieciństwo zmieniająca się kategoria społeczna*, „Problemy opiekuńczo-wychowawcze”, 4(2002), p. 5.

¹⁸ J. Nikitorowicz, *Edukacja regionalna i międzykulturowa*, op. cit, p. 269.

¹⁹ Cf. B. Smolińska-Theiss, *Dzieciństwo zmieniająca się kategoria społeczna*, „Problemy opiekuńczo-wychowawcze”, 4 (2002), p. 5

Stech K., Ratuś B., *Covenants on Human Rights in the process education*, [b.w.], Zielona Góra 1994.

The Act of granting protection to foreigners within the territory of the Republic of Poland, 13 June 2003, Art. 3 and Art. 15, „Journal of Laws” No. 128, item 1175.

The core curriculum for preschool and general education in particular types of schools, 23 December 2008, „Journal of Laws” No. 4, item 17.

The Social Assistance Act of 12 March 2004, Art. 92, „Journal of Laws” No. 64, item 593.

Wojakowski D., *Wielokulturowość pogranicza*, Zakład Wydawniczy Nomos, Kraków 2002.