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Interculturalism in Polish schools according to teachers from borderlands

Abstract: Global cultural exchange is a well-known, boundless phenomenon. Therefore, it is fundamental for countries to promote mutual understanding and tolerance of cultural diversity, to prevent stigmatization and social hermetization from migrant backgrounds, and to foster social inclusion, thus fulfilling the assumptions of sustainable development. Polish society is considered to be relatively homogenous in terms of culture, however, the increasing influx of immigrants, especially from Eastern Europe, poses a new challenge for its national schooling system and multicultural education. That is why the aim of the article was to verify the state of preparation of Polish schools for multicultural education, mutual attitudes of the participants of the educational process, and the relationships between them, as well as to indicate dependency between parents, students, and teachers. The article presents the results of quantitative research carried out in a group of early childhood education teachers from border regions. The results of the conducted research showed the state of intercultural education in Polish schools before the start of the war between Russia and Ukraine. The study is barely the attempt of monitoring the condition of intercultural education, especially in the current "new multicultural reality" in Polish schools.

Keywords: education, acculturation, cooperation, social integration, interculturalism, multiculturalism

Introduction

The socio-political changes of the last decades have contributed to global cultural exchange. Nowadays, various types of problems can be observed and, at the same time, some attempts to solve them, which are related to the functioning of culturally diverse societies.

Certainly, meeting people from different cultures carries a number of positive and negative implications in relation to various areas of social life (Cantle, 2012; Berry, 1997; Ryan, Sales, Tilki and Siara, 2009; Wilson, 2014). Regardless of the reasons for settling in a new place, their consequence is the organization, and implementation of the systems that enable social integration understood as structural, social, and cultural integration (Wessendorf and Phillimore, 2019).

One of the areas in which the process of integrating diverse cultural environments takes place is the school environment. chool is one of the first places where a student – regardless of age – has the opportunity to interact with culturally diverse peers. Thanks to the educational system that implements the assumptions of intercultural education, it is possible to obtain positive results in reducing racial prejudice or cultural diversity contestation (Osaďan et al., 2016).

A properly functioning education system, implementing the assumptions of intercultural education, is the basis for the development of an individual who is open to discovering and respecting all forms of cultural diversity (Portera, 2019). The process of intercultural education also enables shaping a democratic society (Veugelers, 2019). Effective education develops intercultural communication competencies, values and attitudes that prepare for living in a democratic society (Huang, 2015) which promotes understanding and respect for cultural diversity (Lourenço, 2018).

Intercultural education also partially implements the goals of Sustainable Development, such as: promoting a culture of peace, non-violence, global citizenship, and the appreciation of cultural diversity (United Nations, 2015).

In many countries, intercultural education has been taking place for many years. Examples of countries in which cultural integration is the everyday life of educational work may be the Scandinavian countries (Mikander et al., 2018), the United Kingdom (Hearnden and Sundaram, 2011) or Germany (Berg, 2011).

So far, Poland has been a country with little cultural diversity – at the start of implementing the assumptions of multicultural education. Poles have been the nationality which used to emigrate to other countries (Spigelman, 2013; Krings et al., 2013; Janicka and Kaczmarczyk, 2016; Cyrus and Vogel, 2006; Lustanski, 2009). However, over the last few years, Poland has seen a significant increase in the number of immigrants, especially from Eastern Europe and, in particular, as a result of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine.

The article presents the results of the research showing the image of multiculturalism in Polish schools.

Methodological assumptions of the own research

The research was aimed at verifying the readiness of Polish schools from the point of view of multicultural education, to recognize the mutual attitudes of students, parents and teachers, and to identify dependencies in the relationships of the indicated educational entities. The following research questions specify the research goals in detail:
  – What is the role of the intercultural assistant and the preparation of teachers to work with children of different nationalities?
  – What are the relations between students and parents of different nationalities in the opinion of teachers?
  – What is the cooperation between teachers and parents of other nationalities like?
  – Are there any relationships between parents, students and teachers, and what relationships are they?

The scientific approach to the research is characterized by the systematic collection of data in order to obtain a clear and unbiased picture of the aspect (Tolmie et al., 2011). This study was a quantitative research that showed the image of multiculturalism in Polish borderland schools. The data obtained from the survey presented a picture of the investigated area from the perspective of junior class teachers.

The study used quantitative survey data to which statistical analysis was applied. The statistical analysis was carried out in R software, version 3.5.1 (http://cran.r-project.org). The variables are presented as count n and % frequency. For the comparison of groups, questions using Likert's scale were treated as quantitative variables. The normality of distribution in subgroups was evaluated with Shapiro-Wilk test and was based on skewness and kurtosis values. The analysis between two groups was made with independent t-test while the correlation between variables was analyzed with Pearson's correlation coefficient. Since some researchers treat Likert scale as ordinal measurement scale, all tests were repeated using their non-parametric equivalents, adequate for ordinal measurement scale (Mann-Whitney U test, Spearman's correlation). In all cases, conclusions from parametric analysis were confirmed in non-parametric tests. The final results present the data from parametric analysis. All tests were based on $\alpha = 0.05$.

The survey was conducted on a population of 74 teachers of junior primary schools. The participants are employees of institutions from the borderland and industrial areas, where people of different nationalities reside more often. The surveyed teachers definitely most often indicated the presence of students from Eastern Europe, mainly Ukraine, a few cases from Belarus and Russia, and isolated cases of students from China or other Western European countries.

All surveyed teachers are of native origin and have higher education.

Results

The first area of the survey related to checking the preparation of teachers to work with children of various nationalities. The obtained data showed the teachers' opinion on the level of preparation for work in a multicultural class obtained during their university studies. In the opinion of 52 respondents (70.3%), higher education did not prepare them to work with children of a different culture. 15 (20.3%) of the surveyed teachers indicated that the preparation for work in a multicultural classroom acquired during higher education was sufficient. On the other hand, 7 respondents (9.4%) indicated a high assessment of preparation for work in a multicultural class obtained during university studies.

The surveyed teachers were also asked to indicate where they gained experience in working with children of a different culture. The biggest number of respondents' indications (57 times) pointed to work in school as a place of gaining experience. Additional training as the part of professional development was indicated much less frequently (14 times). On the other hand, the least numerous were: gaining experience outside school, as part of private contacts (9 times) and during studies (7 times).

As regards the preparation of schools to work with children of different nationalities, the presence of an intercultural assistant in the educational process was verified. In the results obtained, 8 surveyed teachers (11%) indicated the presence of an assistant, while 66 teachers (89%) indicated the absence of an intercultural assistant in the process of educating children from a different culture.

The research results also showed the mutual relations between students of Polish origin and students of a different culture in the opinion of teachers – Table 1.

Table 1. Teachers' opinions on mutual relations between Polish students and students of different nationality

The assessment of the level of students' mutual acceptance	Very positively	Positively	Indifferently	Reluctantly	Distrustfully
The acceptance of children from a different culture by Polish peers	25.7%	57.1%	17.1%	0%	0%
The reactions of culturally different children to Polish peers	17.1%	64.2 %	17.1%	0%	1.4%

Source: own research.

The obtained research results indicate that in the vast majority of cases, the mutual relations of children are positive (57.1% among students of Polish nationality and 64.2% among students of other nationalities). Behaviours showing mutual distrust or dislike are only isolated cases.

There was a significant correlation between the way children of another culture are accepted by Polish peers (Likert scale, 1 – very negatively, 5 – very positively) and the way children from another culture react at Polish peers (Likert scale, 1 – very negatively, 5 – very positively), rho = 0.66, p < 0.001. The correlation was positive and strong, meaning that the more positively Polish peers welcomed children from other cultures, the more positive reactions from foreign children they received.

The collected research material also showed the teachers' opinions on the cooperation with parents of culturally different children. The respondents most often (41 teachers – 55.4%) assessed the cooperation with parents of a different culture as good. 16 teachers (21.6%) evaluated the cooperation very well. Negative evaluations were much less frequent – 10 respondents (13.5%) gave poor opinions about cooperation, and only 3 (4%) expressed the view that there was no cooperation.

There was also a significant correlation between the way children from another culture react at Polish peers (Likert scale, 1 – very negatively, 5 – very positively) and the quality of cooperation between the teacher and parents of children from another culture (Likert scale, 1 – no cooperation, 4 – very good cooperation), rho = 0.45, p < 0.001. The correlation was positive and moderate, meaning that the better the cooperation between the teacher and parents of children from another culture was, the more positive the reactions from foreign children towards Polish peers were.

The obtained results were also verified in terms of the relationship between the source of the gained experience and the quality of cooperation with parents of a different culture.

Table 2. The cooperation between the teacher and parents of children from another culture against the source of teachers' experience in work with children from another culture

Source of teachers' experience in work with children from another culture	Cooperation between a teacher and parents of children from another culture				MD (95% CI)	p
	n	Source of experience = YES	n	Source of experience = NO		
University studies	7	3.43±0.53	63	2.95±0.75	0.48 (-0.03;0.98)	0.062
Work in school	57	2.98±0.72	13	3.08±0.86	-0.10 (-0.64;0.45)	0.719
Additional trainings within professional development	14	3.29±0.61	56	2.93±0.76	0.36 (-0.04;0.75)	0.076
Outside the work, within personal network	9	3.56±0.53	61	2.92±0.74	0.64 (0.21;1.07)	0.007

Source: own research.

The data on cooperation between the teacher and parents of children from another culture are presented as mean±SD based on Likert's scale (1 – no cooperation, 4 – very good cooperation). Groups with and without a given source of teachers' experience are compared with the use of independent t-test. MD – mean different between groups is calculated as the group with teachers having a specific source of experience minus the group without teachers having that source of experience with 95% confidence interval.

The cooperation between the teacher and the parents of children from another culture measured on 4-point Likert scale was also significantly differentiated by gaining experience by teachers in the work with different cultures from their personal network outside their work. The cooperation teacher – parents from another culture was better in the group with teachers gaining experience from their personal network (M = 3.56, SD = 0.53) than in the remaining cases (M = 2.92, SD = 0.74), MD = 0.64 CI$_{95}$ [0.21; 1.07], p = 0.007. The remaining sources of teachers' experience in work with children from another culture (university studies, additional training, work) did not significantly differentiate the level of cooperation between the teacher and parents of children from another culture (p > 0.05).

Recognizing the state of multiculturalism in schools, the reactions of parents of Polish children towards culturally different children and parents were examined. The surveyed teachers did not indicate the occurrence of negative behaviours manifested by discrimination, negative attitude, or opposition to joint learning. The respondents (37 surveyed teachers – 50%) most often indicated the attitudes of parents of Polish nationality, proving their indifference towards culturally different children and parents. Less frequently – 26 teachers (35%) – indicated the fact of establishing relationships with parents of a different culture. On the other hand, the general lack of establishing relationships with parents of different nationalities was indicated by only 8 of the surveyed teachers (11%).

The reactions of parents of Polish children towards culturally different children and parents were also analyzed in terms of the relationship with the acceptance of children of a different nationality by students of Polish nationality – Table 3.

Table 3. Acceptance of children from another culture by Polish peers in school class against parents' reaction at children and parents from another culture

Parents' reaction at children and parents from another culture	Acceptance of children from another culture by Polish peers in the school class				MD (95% CI)	p
	n	Parents'reaction = YES	n	Parents' reaction = NO		
Making relationships with other parents	26	4.35±0.49	44	3.93±0.70	0.42 (0.13;0.70)	0.005
Not making relationships with other parents	8	3.75±0.71	62	4.13±0.64	-0.38 (-0.98;0.22)	0.185
Indifference to children and parents from another culture	37	4.00±0.75	33	4.18±0.53	-0.18 (-0.49;0.12)	0.240

Source: own research.

The data on acceptance of children from another culture by Polish peers are presented as mean ±SD based on Likert's scale (1 – very negatively, 5 – very positively). Groups with and without a given parents' reaction are compared with the use of independent t-test. MD – mean different between groups is calculated as the group with parents' reaction minus the group without parents' reaction with 95% confidence interval.

The level of acceptance of children from another culture by Polish peers in the school class measured on 5-point Likert scale was significantly differentiated by making relationships with other parents in the responses provided by parents of Polish children. The acceptance of children from another cul-

ture by Polish peers was higher when their parents made relationships with other parents (M = 4.35, SD = 0.49) than in the remaining cases (M = 3.93, SD = 0.70), MD = 0.42 CI$_{95}$ [0.13; 0.70], p = 0.005. The remaining parents' reactions at children and parents from other cultures did not differentiate the level of acceptance of children from another culture by Polish peers (p > 0.05).

Discussion

Intercultural education is an excellent tool for overcoming stigma or a sense of alienation. Thanks to it, it becomes possible to shape a multidimensional identity (Ogrodzka-Mazur, 2018). However, conducting intercultural education requires constant monitoring. In this study, the aim was to determine the state of preparation of Polish educational institutions for multicultural education in the opinion of teachers from borderlands. Our findings show that there are apparent shortcomings and positive aspects of multiculturalism in the school environment.

Some noticeable shortcomings occur in pedagogical studies and in improving teachers' professional skills. Another organizational problem of the educational system is also the cultural assistant, who is rarely employed in schools. Despite the fact that, according to the provisions of the law in force since 2009 (Dziennik Ustaw *[Lournal of Laws]*, 2009), schools may employ a person who speaks the student's native language as a teacher's assistant, in practice, these persons are rarely employed. According to the research on the sense of self-efficacy among Polish teachers, there was no positive correlation between the sociocultural diversity in the classroom and the sense of self-efficacy. According to the authors of the study, this situation may result from worse organizational conditions of Polish education, such as: working conditions, a group size, professional development resources, facilities, etc. (Romijn et al., 2020). These assumptions are correct, because – according to the current research – the organization of the multicultural education process shows many shortcomings.

In addition to the identified problems, the research results made it possible to identify those areas of multiculturalism that predict the success of the ongoing social changes. These are the attitudes of teachers and students. It can be concluded that despite the shortcomings and system imperfections, the participants' attitudes in the educational process favour the implementation of the assumptions of multicultural educa-

tion. Similar attitudes have been shown in studies conducted in other countries. Despite organizational problems (other than in Poland), the involvement of teachers or mutual relations between students testifies to a positive attitude towards culturally diverse students (Zotou, 2017, Karacabey and Ozdere et al., 2019). The attitudes of students of Polish origin are also highly favourable, as they prove the lack of prejudice and discrimination. They are particularly important because early intercultural experiences enable the development of intercultural competences and a positive perception of diversity (Waal et al., 2020). Based on the obtained research results, it can be concluded that younger school-age children are open to meeting new places and people. Children's curiosity, which is a permanent part of their development, also realized through social interactions (Engel, 2011), is not limited only to their own culture. The attitude of parents of Polish children towards students and parents of other nationalities is slightly different. In the opinion of teachers, the most common attitude of Polish parents proves their indifference to families of other nationalities. While more open-minded attitudes would be more desirable, it is promising that teachers did not observe negative behaviour.

The analysis of the research results also indicated several dependencies that affect building a multicultural society. These are the relationships between:

– attitudes of Polish students and the attitudes of children of other nationalities,
– cooperation of teachers with parents of other nationalities and the attitude of children of other nationalities,
– teachers' experience and the quality of cooperation with parents of different nationalities,
– the attitude of Polish parents and the attitude of Polish children.

The relationships between the entities and their connections are shown in Figure1.

The research also showed how important teachers are in contact with all entities. Due to their professional duties, they can adequately create conditions for establishing proper relations among students and parents. They are the first to mediate in the case of misunderstandings or problems. Therefore, it is important that a constant element of their preparation and professional development is to raise their qualifications to work in a culturally diverse class.

Figure 1. Dependencies and connections between the entities of the educational process
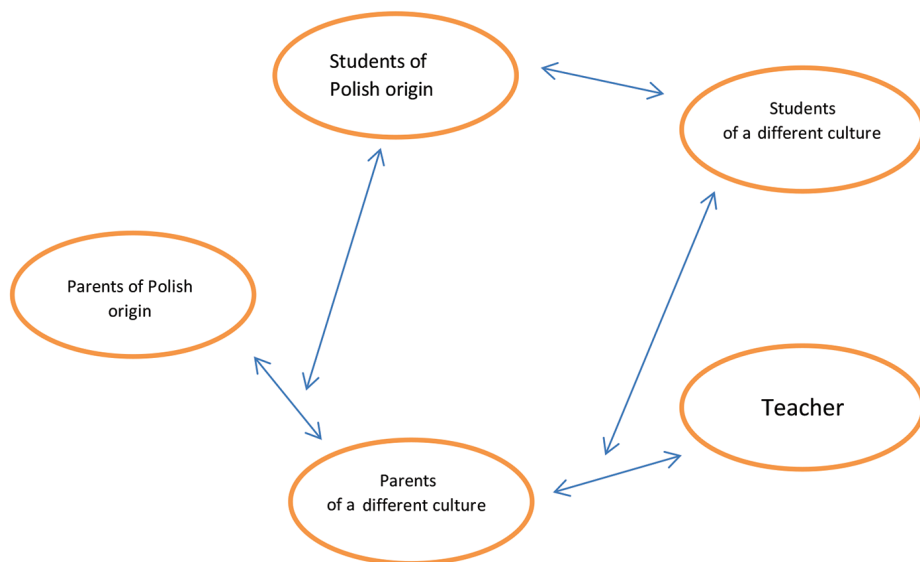
Source: own research.

The results of the conducted research showed the state of intercultural education in Polish borderland schools before the start of the war between Russia and Ukraine. The challenges faced by the educational system in the face of the influx of a large number of Ukrainian students should undoubtedly be an incentive to undertake further research on the "new multicultural reality" in Polish schools.

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