

Social Experiences of Future Teachers – a Research Report

Abstract

The basic notional category and the leading motif of the presented study is social experience of candidates for teachers. The reflection is grounded on the social psychology of development in the context of the reality experienced by the individual, the meanings applied to experiences (Tyszkowa, Przetacznikowa, Brzezińska), and in the perspective of intercultural education (Lewowicki, Nikitorowicz).

In the undertaken discussion, the author refers to the results of extensive multi-variate research conducted in 2011–2012 in several academic environments which differ in location (the centre – the borderland) and in socio-economic potential. This constitutes the background against which the determinants are indicated of preparing future teachers for work in multicultural conditions.

Keywords: experience, future teacher, multiculturalism, intercultural education, borderland, centre, socio-economic potential

Introduction

Intercultural contacts are the daily routine of multicultural societies. They result both in enriching the home culture with the assimilated foreign elements and in activating defensive activities aiming at the preservation of old values perceived as one's own. Cross-group interactions take place along with cultural contact and with inevitability of conflicts and misunderstandings (Huntington 2003; Nikitorowicz 2009). In such relations, the understanding experience (Lewowicki 2000: 27) gives rise to dialogue in education as the basis for negotiation, compromise and agreement.

Experience is an ambiguous term and can be considered in several senses – e.g. the colloquial, physiological and philosophical one. In the pedagogical sense, it is “the knowledge, skills and habits acquired during life-long contacts with the outer world, i.e. with its influence on man, and reversely – the human influence on the fragments of this world accessible to man” (Kupisiewicz 2009: 34). Most frequently, this means “the process or result of direct familiarization with reality through methodical observation or experiment” (Okoń 2007:85).

Following Maria Tyszkowa (1988:44–79), in the undertaken discussion experience is understood as a **trace (representation, effect) of previous human activity in relations with the world. The contents of these traces are not so much situations, but rather behaviours, activities, experiences, and mental, physical or physiological processes which take place or are felt in a particular situation** (similar standpoints are presented by Stempniewska-Żakowicz 1996, Trempała 2000). In this approach, the experience gained in the individual’s own activity in relations with the world can be also treated as a system of practical and procedural knowledge. According to the fundamental idea of neo-constructivism (the concept of mental development elaborated by Maria Tyszkowa), the individual’s mental development consists in **collecting and processing experience which is subjected to structuralization and restructuralization** as a result of the individual’s activity throughout the whole life cycle in constantly undertaken relations with the world.

The discussion on future teachers’ experiences in relations with a representative of a different culture (the Other- a person of different /from one’s own/ ethnic, national, in broader terms – cultural, civilization origin or of different sex, age, ideology, etc. – in its broad sense) is situated in this work in the learning process. This is in accord with the views of: Maria Przetacznikowa (1973:40) “learning is a process of creation, transformation and consolidation of regulating activities based on individual experience”, and Ziemowit Włodarski (1974:17) “the acquisition of experiences expressed in the modification of behaviour”. The modern attitude to learning is the same – it is “a process which leads to a relatively permanent change of real behaviour or its potential based on experience” (Gerrig, Zimbardo 2011:168).

The understanding of education also brings about a significant span of experiences and its subjects. This is noticed by Zbigniew Kwieciński (1990: 99), who claims that what can be understood by education is “the whole of experiences and influences on the individual’s development, the whole of experiences and influences valued as beneficial for the development, the whole of developmental possibilities used by the individual or the whole of institutional practices organized in order to influence the desired development of people”.

Experiences in direct relations with the representative of a different culture – presentation of authorial research results

Modern societies, with all their hallmarks of multiculturalism, function mostly as pluralistic and tolerant communities with certain areas of intolerance. This affects education at its different levels. What shape should education apply in such conditions? How prepared should teachers be for work in the multicultural environment? What is the relation between what one (future teacher) currently experiences and who this one is, how one functions and approaches Other people or one's own development?

Various scientific disciplines make attempts to answer these questions. The significance of pedagogy here is particular as other sciences restrict their discussion only to description. Basing the research on the conducted diagnosis, pedagogy makes designs or transformations and implements changes. Its role is strategic for further development and functioning of individuals, groups and communities.

The presented study aims at viewing candidates for teachers as people who construct their identity through experiences in relations with the Other/Others in daily life situations. What is referred to is a set of results of extensive multivariate studies¹ conducted in 2011/2012 in three central zones of Poland and three borderland ones, all of which are differentiated as regards the socio-economic development. A representative group of 1268 people took part in the studies. The research model combined a quantitative strategy (auditorium questionnaire) with a qualitative one (including group and individual interviews). In the analysis of qualitative data, both simple and more complex methods (e.g. factor analysis or data clustering) were applied. The application of these methods (e.g. factor analysis or interpretation of the respondents' answers) resulted in the (in a way) open character of the results. The description of the examined group, research ground and methodology is included in Szczurek-Boruta 2013 (in print).

The transformations occurring in the contemporary world, also present in Poland (European integration, globalization, migration), make multiculturalism a popular phenomenon. Traditionally limited to racial or ethnic minorities, the notion of multiculturalism is applied today in regard to differences resulting from

¹ The studies were conducted within the research project: *Uczyć się od innych i uczyć-nauczać innych – praca nauczyciela w warunkach wielokulturowości /To learn from others and to teach others – the teacher's work in multicultural conditions/*, National Science Centre in Cracow, University of Silesia, Faculty of Ethnology and Education in Cieszyn, project No. N N106 416640, contract No. 4166/B/H03/2011/40.

language, sex, social class, individual dissimilarity, and obviously also racial or ethnic differences.

The applied factor analysis allowed for reducing the number of 22 variables specifying the experiences in direct contacts with the Other and discovering a structure in relationships between these variables (cf., Szczurek-Boruta 2013a). There were two relatively independent factors in the correlation matrix – the first factor (FI) **associated with experiences in contacts with national, ethnic and religious groups** and the second (FII) **with experiences in contacts with other groups representing different cultures**.

The FI factor is distinguished by high loads in the case of direct experiences in relations with the representatives of national, ethnic and religious groups. What can be noticed here is the functioning of the “cultural stereotype,” which consists in the beliefs concerning others who come from particular countries or belong to particular nations. The research results indicate the most important features which determine viewing man as the Other – ethnicity, nationality, religion, and race.

This is confirmed by the research results of Ewa Nowicka and Sławomir Łodziński (2001), who stated that the attitudes to others are mostly determined by the country of their origin – and first of all, the stereotype of this country which functions in social consciousness.

The FII factor is distinguished by high loads in the case of experiences with a person of different social/material status, a person at different (older/younger) age, a person of different religion, a disabled person, a person of different sex. In this study, the FII factor was given the name of a mixed factor.

The multidimensionality of psychological space assumes the possibility of distinguishing many different dimensions in which various representations can be considered simultaneously (representation due to age, sex, kinship; due to physical distance: an acquaintance, neighbour, foreigner; due to semantic distance – similarities and differences in attitudes or interests; due to the social dimension – a person from the same or different group, from classes such as fully able or disabled) (Lewowicki 2010: 5–20; Nikitorowicz 2012: 47–66). These issues are confirmed by the results of authorial studies.

High values of the FI factor² seem to indicate a bigger number of irritating or negative experiences in contacts with representatives of national, ethnic or religious groups. By entering a relationship with the other, one is transferred to

² In all the examined environments, the FI factor reaches the mean over 4.6 in the applied scale/scoring: 6 – no experiences, 5 – irritating, 4 – negative, 3 – indifferent, 2 – positive, 1 – enriching experiences.

another world, “we experience such transition as a kind of shock” (Berger, Luckmann 1983:52). What is revealed here is the ambivalent nature of the first impulse towards Others. Man needs another person, searches for the person without whom life is not possible. However, what appears at the moment of the first encounter is uncertainty and fear.

The experiences in contacts with people differing in social/material status, age, religion, disability or sex (the FII factor³) are indifferent and positive in the respondents’ opinions.

The conducted statistical analysis indicates the existence of the relationship between the socio-economic potential, (central/borderland) location and the future teachers’ experiences in direct contacts with Others (canonical $R r=0.41535$; $\chi^2(20)=354.14$, $p=0.0000$ moderate correlation, substantial relationship- Guilford 1960: 171).

The experiences in contacts with national, ethnic and religious groups (the FI factor) of borderland residents in all zones differentiated in the socio-economic development are perceived by them as rather negative and irritating (Szczurek-Boruta 2013a). Natural, better possibilities of such contacts in borderlands might frequently bring about negative feelings or conflicts and arguments – hence such distinctive declarations and evaluations of these contacts by the respondents. Specificity of the environment and the resulting closeness of the Other affects the attitudes to dissimilarity.

In comparison to borderlands, the average values of the FI factor are higher in the central zones. Most of the negative experiences in contacts with national, ethnic and religious groups happen to students living in central and poorly developed parts. It is possible that labour market threats raise more resistance towards Others here than in the case of the respondents living in other zones. Differences in the respondents’ life situation are of some significance – the better the socio-economic situation and bigger the GDP, the lesser the fears. When this group (students living in central and poorly developed zones) enters the labour market, everyone (particularly the culturally different) becomes a rival in the hunt for jobs. This “rational” mechanism of thinking is explained by the theory of a scapegoat (Nelson 2003).

The respondents’ experiences in direct contacts with Others might result in their ethnocentric and ethno-relativist attitudes. To a great extent, the economic crisis of the whole European world is the reason for the rebirth of closed, ethnocentric

³ The FI factor reaches the mean over 2.0 in the applied scale/scoring: 6 – no experiences, 5 – irritating, 4 – negative, 3- indifferent, 2 – positive, 1 – enriching experiences.

attitudes not only among the young but also the whole society. This seems to be confirmed by studies conducted in the eastern borderland (Muszyńska 2013, Nikitorowicz 2009, Sobocki 2000) and the southern one (Wysocka 2009). Distance towards others, fear and signs of discrimination also take place in the case of youth in the western borderland (Kurzępa 2007).

It can be claimed that, in the context of research results concerning future teachers and the discussed studies in different borderlands of Poland, the future teachers are not free from stereotypes and prejudice, which determines their educational activity. What may be significant for breaking the unwillingness and distance towards Others is intercultural education carried out from the earliest years. The research output concerning intercultural education and borderland communities is substantial. The series "Intercultural Education" edited by T. Lewowicki comprises 55 publications. There are papers edited by J. Nikitorowicz, published since 1995 in "Trans Humana" Publishing House, and publications edited by Z. Jasiński at the University of Opole.

Tadeusz Lewowicki (2012: 15–16) points at its duties in this respect: "shaping the world of values, knowledge, attitudes, which will lead to peaceful coexistence, tolerance, cooperation, decent living standards, respect for human rights, freedom".

The FII factor, mixed with experiences in contacts with the remaining groups, the representatives of different cultures, has relatively low values⁴. Experiences of this type are positive. The more intensive the socio-economic development that takes place in the centre and in borderlands, the lower the FII values are – thus, the experiences are more positive.

In environments with very good living standards, a positive attitude is shaped to the elderly, disabled and to people in a difficult financial situation. Therefore, high socio-economic potential offers more possibilities of aid and support for endangered or marginalized groups. It also provides more safety to the respondents – therefore, the fear of Others is weaker. Apart from this, what is observed in the societies in which man is regarded as the prior value are many dimensions of human functioning – the issue of the rank of a person who differs in the social/material status, age, disability (health or biological-physical dysfunctions) or sex does not determine this person's participation in social and economic rights (Kościńska 1998; Suchodolska, Gebel 2008:89–125).

⁴ Values oscillating around the mean of 2.0 in the applied scale/scoring: 6 – no experiences, 5 – irritating, 4 – negative, 3- indifferent, 2 – positive, 1 – enriching experiences.

Conclusion

Social experiences are viewed in this study as particularly interesting and essentially significant issues in preparing the teacher for work in multicultural conditions. What prevails in the article are the motifs concerning the experiences which take place outside the academic community and are not intentional from the standpoint of the teachers' education. This constitutes a relatively multisided approach to the future teachers' social experiences and an image of various determinants of the respondents' professional preparation.

In the description of complex determinants of preparing teachers for work in culturally differentiated environments – in the multicultural world, an authorial approach has been applied. The theoretical background for the major subject of reflection clearly emphasizes the relations between the issues of intercultural education and the knowledge acquired in the field of pedagogy, psychology, sociology, anthropology and other sciences.

What constitutes the value of the collected empirical material is that it drifts apart from fragmentary descriptions, characterizations of age groups living in one selected environment (e.g. town, province), and presents a cross-section of the whole generation – of candidates for teachers (the examined group is representative). This enables comparisons and generalizations.

On the whole, the presented work introduces a lot of significant information and opens new perspectives for studies on the borderline of intercultural education and general pedagogy, pedeutology, several subdisciplines of psychology and sociology as well as some other fields of the broadly understood humanities.

The results of empirical studies urge to view the candidate for the teaching profession as a person who constructs their identity in the course of experiences collected in different life situations in relations with the Other/Others.

Unique ways of going through, sensing and interpreting daily experiences constitute a significant area of determinants in preparing the future teacher for work in multicultural conditions (Szczurek-Boruta 2013a,b). Candidates for teachers are members of a particular culture, since the earliest years they have been familiarizing with its typical cognitive principles of interpreting the world, they learn these rules every day, and through individual experience – they produce specific interpretative rules. As a result, every experience goes through the filter of general knowledge which the individual possesses on this subject and of the implicit cultural and individual interpretative rules.

What constitutes an important field of determinants in preparing future teachers for work in multicultural conditions, apart from social experiences, is the eco-

conomic potential and socio-cultural environment. More intensive socio-economic development offers better opportunities for functioning for individuals, groups and communities.

The respondents, future teachers, are equipped with certain knowledge- experiences in contacts with Others. They have a definite (positive, indifferent, negative) emotional attitude. They are aware of the presence and significance of the Other/ Others, they are aware of the multitude and each individual's right to existence and to separate identity. What is possible in this situation are multisided meetings of cultures, their polyphonic and multidirectional dialogue, and on some occasions also argument or conflict.

The sine qua non for social integration and for implementing elements of interculturalism is the activeness, engagement level of individuals, groups and communities. Man should be aware of the fact that s/he continually learns from Other people in daily life situations and should be aware of developing the need for acquiring experience and sensitivity to the enriching dissimilarity of Others (Szczyrek-Boruta 2012: 25–31, 2013 a,b).

Intercultural education aims at building bridges of understanding with Others. Undertaking this is not only an ethical obligation, but also an urgent problem of contemporary times. Continual learning in interpersonal contacts and cultural sensitization in the direct contact with dissimilarity are essential conditions for shaping not only the identity of self-aware people, but also the pedagogical culture of society – the conditions of social integration.

Care for successful implementation of the tasks of intercultural education must be related to the teacher's inner condition and professional preparation. Social experiences in relations with the representative of another culture are of substantial significance in constructing identity and in preparing for the teaching profession.

The conducted diagnosis of the future teachers' social experiences, in their personal, social and cultural contexts, may contribute to better use of their potential and may become a basis for preparing highly-qualified pedagogical staff. This will also enhance broadening of teachers' competences and developing learners' key competences, which might form the foundation for developing the pedagogical theory and optimizing pedagogical activities.

The reflection on the conditions or chances for professional development of candidates for teachers, on the determinants of their preparation for work in multicultural conditions, as well as on the directions of changes in teachers' education co-occurs with the methodological approach applied in this study. This may facilitate shaping the pedagogical subdiscipline of intercultural pedagogy.

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The project has been financed by the National Science Centre.