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Development of intercultural communication competence – on the basis of a study conducted among Polish and Israeli secondary school students

Abstract: The presented diagnostic study concerning intercultural competence was carried out in the pedagogical context of intercultural education. The research place was chosen purposively: it resulted from the intercultural character of Białystok. In the interwar period that the study refers to, the biggest national groups in the town were Poles and Jews. There were also Belarusians, Russians, Germans and Tatars.

As part of the analysis of intercultural competence of students from Poland and Israel I focused on the respondents' declarations concerning their knowledge of the social structure of pre-war Białystok. Then, I determined what motivates secondary school students to learn about the past. Developing the competence in the affective/motivational area is of key importance in intercultural communication. Identifying the reasons why secondary school students from Poland and Israel find it worth learning about the history of their ancestors is as important as knowledge of the history of our cultural group and other cultures. It was also important to determine the level of Polish youths' readiness to communicate with students from Israel, and vice versa. Diagnosing the students' competence allows educators to plan adequate educational activities aimed at broadening intercultural competence, to strengthen the existing resources, to improve the weak points, and fill in the gaps.

Keywords: intercultural competence, intercultural communication, intercultural education, social memory

Introduction

Intercultural education is the area of pedagogy in which I did research into intercultural competence. It refers to the problems and needs of autochthonic cultural groups inhabiting the same territory for several generations, as well

as educational activities related to cultural borderland areas. The research place was chosen purposively and it resulted from the intercultural character of Białystok. In the inter-war period, which I referred to in the study, there were some Belarusians, Russians, Germans and Tatars in the town, and the two most numerous national groups (at least from the beginning of the 19th century up to WWII) were Poles and Jews (Dobroński, 2001, p. 172).

Nowadays, Białystok is an important city for Jews from Israel. People of Jewish origin born in Białystok before the war have visited Białystok every year together with their children to celebrate the anniversary of the Białystok Ghetto Uprising. Many of those Jews have already died, but their children and grandchildren still maintain contacts with the place their ancestors lived in. Since 2013, students from the Mekif Yehud High School in Israel have been visiting Poland and meeting students from schools in Białystok. This inspired me to examine the intercultural competence of students from Poland and Israel, so as to find out their (declared) knowledge concerning the past of their place of residence / the place where their ancestors were born or lived. I wanted to check the importance of identity of that place of the younger generation and learn the reasons why secondary school students from Poland and Israel think it is worth learning about the history of their ancestors. It was also crucial to determine their level of readiness to learn behaviors needed in intercultural communication.

Objectives of intercultural education

The objective of intercultural education is to develop the competence in communicating with people from different cultures. Intercultural competence is gained in the social environment in which the individual is subject to group influence. Each educational environment has specific goals to meet, with the measurable effect of intercultural competence. A special role in developing this competence is played by the family – the basic community in which the processes of socialization and upbringing naturally occur. Apart from the family, the local environment and peer groups are a natural educational setting.

Analyzing UNESCO documents, Wiktor Rabczuk (2013) points to the primary principles of intercultural education, such as respecting the cultural identity of the learner, providing each learner with knowledge, attitudes and cultural competence necessary for active participation in the society, which contribute to respect, understanding and solidarity among individuals.

Interactions between cultures inspire educationalists to extend the educational offer with contents and tasks which Mirosław Sobecki defines as: “all the activities that refer to cultures and their elements being in the state of interaction (diffusion or interference) and aim at creating pedagogical acts whose effect is the development of appropriate attitudes of individuals and groups toward cultural diversity as well as conscious, reflective identification with one’s own cultural heritage” (Sobecki, 2007, p. 27). Intercultural education applies to children, adolescents and adults subject to school education and lifelong learning processes. Jerzy Nikitorowicz (2009, pp. 279–282) suggests that intercultural education should result in socio-cultural dynamization of various groups, self-discovery, and learning about other groups. As a result students will be able to integrate with others and get closer to them, at the same time maintaining their individuality and visions of development.

The basic goal of intercultural education is to build an intercultural society based on the principles of equality, tolerance, freedom, and a positive attitude to minority groups. The sense of security and freedom to manifest the identity of people from minorities depends on the policy of the dominant authorities. This may be a serious problem in the implementation of intercultural education assumptions, as pointed out by Tadeusz Lewowicki: “It is the power elites that determine the area of education for minority groups or those who are vulnerable (politically, economically, culturally etc.) on behalf of the dominant group. The policies of most states, regardless of their official declarations, prefer the processes of assimilation. It is one of the most serious obstacles to intercultural education as it is understood nowadays” (Lewowicki, 2000, pp. 27–33). Those who have power influence the policy of education, i.a., by manipulating with the historical memory. The politics of memory is a tool used to create the official memory of ethnic groups, nations and states. It is mostly based on historical memory, regarded as the only correct one, and used by the currently ruling politicians as a an instrument of indoctrinating the society. Without considering the intercultural context of the society, the politics of memory may become a dangerous tool of assimilation. The degree to which the tasks of intercultural education can be carried out, including the development of intercultural competence, is affected by different institutions: state authorities, political parties holding power in the country, local self-governments, educational policy, and media – free or dependent on political influences.

Development of intercultural communication competence

Intercultural competence is the core of resources for intercultural communication, whose aim, according to Mirosław Sobecki (Sobecki, 2016, p. 158), is to understand diversity, to acquire the skills of interaction through dialogue, and to develop group identity. The role of intercultural education is to prepare individuals to communicate in an intercultural society.

The development of intercultural competence, defined by Katarzyna Gajek (2011, pp. 205–218) as the ability to work effectively at the junction of different cultures, is necessary for talking about what makes us different from others and what we share with them, about tolerance, discrimination and cooperation. The author points out that it includes the person's scope of knowledge and practical skills concerning the disposition to make appropriate communication decisions in relationships with people from other cultures. Intercultural competence teaches communication principles and is needed to better understand oneself and others. We develop the competence in order to be able to establish and deepen interpersonal relations, to build a satisfying life, and to avoid using stereotypes and prejudice in our behavior, so that other people could feel secure with us.

The key importance in developing competence is attributed to school. While analyzing competencies desired in educational activities, Aneta Rogalska-Marasińska suggests approaching them as the categories of human activity which: "are connected (in practical implementations) and associated (in theoretical considerations) with the ability to control and/or cope with complex life or professional situations. To find the best solutions, we need the ability to use various kinds of information, freely draw on our own knowledge, and adequately use the acquired skills. It is also connected with the desire, need and engagement in our own development" (Rogalska-Marasińska, 2017, p. 370).

The psychological and pedagogical trend highlights such attributes of competence as self-awareness, the awareness of the goals and consequences of our activities, and responsibility for them. According to Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak, intercultural competence is effectively acquired if the person achieves three elements: the ability to behave adequately, the awareness of the goals of their behavior, and taking the responsibility for the effects of their behavior (Czerepaniak-Walczak 1995, p. 137). The author stresses the aspect of personality dispositions combined with social mechanisms.

Methodological assumptions of the research into the development of intercultural communication competence

The analyses presented in the text refer to a study carried out in 2013 with participation of general secondary school students from Poland and Israel (the analyses presented herein are a fragment of a broader study carried out as part of the doctoral dissertation supervised by Mirosław Sobiecki, professor of the University of Białystok, on the subject: The memory of the past of Białystok as a part of the collective identity of high school students from the perspective of intercultural education. Comparative studies. The study was conducted in secondary schools in Białystok and in the Kiriati Białystok district in the town of Yehud, Israel. This place was chosen due to its history: it was a residential area established by Białystok Jews who came to Israel after WWII, with the use of funds of people of Jewish origin who had been born in Białystok but lived all over the world. The diagnostic poll method was used in the research. The respondents were 260 students from four general secondary schools in Białystok and 71 students from the high school in Kiriati Białystok in Yehud, Israel. The sampling was both purposive and random. The choice of the number of respondents depended on the size of the towns where the study was done. The population of Białystok is estimated at 300 thousand residents, and Yehud, at 35 thousand residents. In Yehud there is only one high school located in the Kiriati Białystok district, attended by approx. 1,800 students.

The study in Białystok schools was conducted during a single lesson and was anonymous. I personally instructed the students before they began to complete the questionnaires. The study in the Mekif Yehud High School in Israel was conducted with the support from teachers appointed by the management of that school. It was also anonymous and was conducted during a single lesson. I was in touch by mail and by phone with the management of the Yehud school and the appointed person, whom I instructed regarding the proper procedure of carrying out the research among the students. That teacher instructed the students before they began to complete the questionnaires. The feedback after the study in Mekif Yehud school included information about the atmosphere in which the study was conducted. The atmosphere was considered good.

The analysis of intercultural competence of the students was carried out using the model of competence dimensions proposed by Gersten Russell,

who identified the cognitive, emotional and communicative/behavioral components (Bem, 2017, p. 305).

The cognitive component of intercultural competence: high school students' knowledge of the social structure of Białystok before the war

In the cognitive area, the goal of didactic measures is to learn cultural norms and standards. The basis for this learning is the acquisition of knowledge about ourselves and our own culture, because we need to understand ourselves first before we understand others. At the cognitive level, students' knowledge is extended with issues concerning universal aspects of culture and issues connected with the specificity of particular cultures.

It was an important part of my research to find out what students from Poland and Israel know about the social structure of pre-war Białystok. I assumed that the awareness of the past of their ancestors will be the evidence of interest in their roots, but also an inspiration to broaden the knowledge about themselves, their preferences, ways of communication and values they uphold.

In the beginning, I analyzed the students' declared associations with the social structure and intergroup relations in Białystok before the war. The knowledge of the character of the pre-war society in the town was tested on the basis of the answers to the question: *Do you think Białystok was a typically Polish town before the war?* This question was the first stage of studying intercultural competence in the cognitive aspect. In the subsequent stages, the students' knowledge was examined in detail using open-ended questions, in which I asked them to provide any associations with the places, people, events, traditions and names characteristic of pre-war Białystok. The next stage involved highlighting signs typical of the town's history. I asked them to provide their associations and use a scale to show their attitude to particular objects, which allowed me to analyze the students' emotional engagement and attitudes. In this article I will only describe the preliminary analysis of the knowledge evidenced by the answers to the question concerning the social structure of Białystok before the war. The students could choose one of the three responses: yes, no, hard to say. They could also explain the reasons why pre-war Białystok can be described as typically Polish or not. In light of the research assumptions, the diagnostically correct answer was "no", because Białystok has always been a borderland, multicultural town. Therefore, I considered this response as correct.

The analysis of data concerning the respondents' knowledge on the social structure before the war shows that nearly half the students from Poland know that Białystok at that time was not a typically Polish town. Only less than 15% students from this group claim that in the past, Białystok had a typically Polish character.

It is different in the group of students from Israel. The belief that Białystok was a typically Polish town is shared by approx. 32% respondents, and is twice as common as the opinion that it was not typically Polish (approx. 15% respondents). In this group of students the most frequent response is that it is hard to answer this question.

The students from Poland expressing the belief that Białystok before the war was not a typically Polish town explain this conviction with the political situation of Białystok throughout the history: *it has never been typically Polish, because it lies near the border, which changed many times in history (female, grade 3, VII LO, no. 256); because Białystok was under annexation and it was hard to maintain Polishness (female, grade 1, I LO, no. 72).*

Explaining why Białystok was not a typically Polish town, the students from Polish high schools also referred to the specific social structure resulting from the location of Białystok at a cultural borderland. *Białystok was a melting pot of people from various nationalities, who were either relocated after WWII or died during the war (female, grade 3, VII LO, no. 256); it was not typically Polish because before the war there were 40% Jews here; Białystok was a multicultural town, its residents were Jews, Belarusians, Lithuanians, Tatars, Russians, Ukrainians, and Germans (male, grade 3, V LO, no. 52).* The associations provided by people from this group prove that they have some basic knowledge on the social structure of pre-war Białystok. Hence, it can be concluded that Białystok school students have intercultural competence in the cognitive aspect.

Unlike the Polish students, most respondents from Israel expressed the belief that before the war, Białystok was a primarily Polish town, usually explaining that Białystok was a part of Poland and Polish people dominated there: *yes, because it was in Poland, that's what my teacher says (male, grade 1, MYHS, no. 264); yes, because Białystok is often mentioned when talking about Poland; yes, because mostly Polish people lived there (female, grade 3, MYHS, no. 299).*

Those students from Yehud who expressed the belief that Białystok was not a typically Polish town in the past used arguments showing their knowledge on the shared Polish and Jewish history of the town: *it was not typically*

Polish, I know that in Białystok there was a big Jewish community and Poles (male, grade 1, MYHS, no. 264).

It is clear that people from Poland and going to school in Poland are more aware that before the war, Białystok was a town of many cultures, where Jews were a considerable group living beside Poles. They also know that Tatars, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Germans and Russians used to live in the town. They explain that this was the result of the town's location at the cultural borderland. The students from Kiriat Bialystok, however, found it hard to describe the social structure of Białystok in the past, which results from the insufficient theoretical knowledge on this subject but also from deficits of practical knowledge, i.e., experience. This shows some deficits in the cognitive aspect of intercultural competence. Only 15% students from Israel mention the shared history of Poles and Jews.

The affective/motivational/emotional component: the reasons why students think it is worth learning about the life of pre-war residents of Białystok

At the affective level, called the motivational or emotional component of competence development, it is important to learn the skills of coping with emotions. The goal is to enhance the competence to consciously recognize emotional states we experience in intercultural contacts to be able to expand our self-observation competence, develop internal motivation, courage and curiosity needed in communication with others.

At this stage of the diagnosis, it was vital to identify the factors of inspiration and motivation of high school students to learn about the past. I assumed that taking into consideration the emotional and cognitive needs of students in this regard will make the educational activities more effective. With a view to planning activities related to intercultural communication aimed at building cooperation between youth from Poland and Israel, I investigated the students' declared motives for gaining knowledge on the life of pre-war Białystok residents. The diagnostic questions were: Do you think contemporary people should learn about the lives of pre-war Białystok residents? What makes you interested in the past/history of Białystok, and to what extent?

In the course of the analysis, I identified five characteristic groups of reasons why the students think it is worth learning about the history of Białystok and its residents. The first group of motivational factors mentioned by the

respondents from Poland and Israel involved the belief that history is a value in itself.

An important subcategory in this group of motivations for displaying interest in history consisted of the responses showing that learning about the lives of pre-war residents of Białystok is an opportunity to gain historical knowledge. Knowledge was perceived by these respondents as a value, which allowed them to satisfy their cognitive needs. Students from Białystok and from Yehud also declared that the exploration of pre-war history of Białystok residents is important because it gives them insight into their cultural heritage. Knowledge about the past satisfies the orientation needs of this group of respondents, especially those related to the formation of awareness of their own culture. Another source of motivation for gaining knowledge about the history is connected with the acquisition of culture and its transfer between generations. The respondents from Poland and Israel explained that it was worth learning about the history of Białystok people because they can share that knowledge with the future generations. And this is important for keeping the continuity of culture. The students from this group pointed out that learning about the history of pre-war Białystok people satisfies their need for a purpose in life and the sense of cultural continuity.

Another subcategory of motivations for learning about the history of Białystok residents before the war is to be able to understand and explain the past. Acquiring knowledge on the past history of those people is a way to understand better the world destroyed during World War II. Learning the stories of Białystok people born before the war allows to understand and explain what happened during the Shoah and to realize what the following generations have lost because of the Holocaust. The responses in this area provide the basis for concluding that knowledge about the history allows young people to satisfy their needs connected with understanding and explaining events from the past. There were also reflections that learning about the life of pre-war residents of Białystok makes it possible to keep the memory of the past. The students stressed that memory is a value in itself.

The second group of motivations for learning about the history of pre-war Białystok residents is the same place of living / the community of life of pre-war and contemporary Białystok people. In this group of reasons, the place of residence is perceived as a cognitive value and the reason for learning about the past. When analyzing the responses of students from Poland and Israel, I identified two categories of reasons why the users of a certain place are obliged to learn about its history. Their responses were a proof that

they felt they had relations at various levels with the place of residence or origin.

The students' declared the reasons why it is worth learning about the town's history are that they feel obliged to acquire knowledge and to remember about the past of the place of their residence or origin. In this case, identification with the place is not of key importance, because according to the students, all the residents are obliged to gain knowledge about the place, even if they do not feel any bond with the place they live in. Another area of motivations for extending knowledge about the past of Białystok people is students' identifying with the place of residence or origin, which stimulates them to learn about that history.

The third group of motivations mentioned by the respondents for interest in the life of Białystok residents before the war included statements that knowledge about history helps in building a regional community. In addition, it supports the formation of patriotic attitudes, strengthens social bonds, and promotes relations with the private homeland. The young people stressed the needs of belonging and security. They wrote that knowledge about the past allows the contemporary generations to build a patriotic attitude and a relationship with their private homelands.

The other reasons why they think it is worth learning about the past of Białystok people are the opportunities to develop and strengthen social bonds. Knowledge about the past stimulates social awareness. According to the respondents from this group, knowledge about the history of Białystok people allows to build a relationship with the town and the people. The students also mentioned that knowledge about the past and memory of the previous generations is a tribute to Białystok people.

The fourth group of motivations for learning the stories of life of pre-war Białystok residents comprises the respondents' statements that history works as a guide to our times. The students highlight the needs related to orientation in the environment and the need of a purpose in life. The respondents from this group argue that knowledge about the past gives them an orientation in the present. It allows them to understand the contemporary reality, history is a source of knowledge on how to live in our times. In this area there were opinions that knowledge about the past is important because it adds value to the present. Young people, both from Poland and from Israel, also wrote that the information on events from the past of Białystok people is significant because the past is a source of knowledge on how to create and explain the present.

The statements of Polish and Israeli respondents, making the fifth group of motivations for exploring the past, proved that the knowledge of the his-

tory of pre-war Białystok residents helps develop the sense of their own identity. Knowing the past makes it possible to build social and individual identity. It provides the answers to some existential questions: Where do I come from? Who am I? Where am I going? According to the respondents, awareness of the past contributes to humans' value. Remembering about our loved ones and their world is important to maintain the continuity of identity. The students pointed to the needs of self-actualization, self-awareness, respect and recognition, and the need of a purpose in life. They declared that learning about pre-war Białystok residents has a cognitive value, because it allows to learn about their own families. In addition, the source of motivation of students from Israel is the belief that knowing the history is people's obligation to their ancestors.

The behavioral component: developing communication skills. Declarations of secondary school students from Poland and Israel regarding their willingness to have contacts with each other

The third level of acquiring competence is the development of particular skills as part of the communicative/behavioral component. The work in this area aims to change the indifferent, submissive or aggressive behaviors toward people from other cultures into constructive, assertive and peaceful ones. The development of proper cultural behaviors is possible thanks to participation in rituals, rites, daily social situations, and physical contact with the artefacts of culture.

When planning educational activities in intercultural communication with the participation of Poles and Jews, I assumed that apart from the diagnosis of their knowledge and their attitude to history, it was necessary to focus as well on whether young people from Białystok and Kiriati Białystok expressed the need to establish mutual contacts. The diagnostic question in that area was: Would you like to have contacts with young Jewish people living in Kiriati Białystok in Israel / with young people living in Białystok?

The respondents from both countries declared that in their opinion, it is worth learning about the heritage of the other group, so it is surprising that as many as 42.3% respondents from Poland admitted they could not see any need to communicate with youths living in Kiriati Białystok in Israel. On the other hand, most of the respondents from the Mekif Yehud High School declared the desire to meet their peers from schools in Białystok (45.07%).

Learning about another culture and practicing new skills as part of the behavioral component is difficult if the students from Poland declare the lack of motivation to communicate with students from Israel.

Apparently, the frequency of trips abroad does not impact the readiness for intercultural contacts. As we can see from the analysis, the respondents from Poland traveled abroad more or less as often as their peers from Israel. In both cases, the reason was usually to go on vacation, less often to visit family or friends, to study, or to work. The basic difference was in the countries the two groups of students visited. Polish students most often traveled to European countries. Locations on other continents were mentioned much less frequently. None of the respondents from Białystok declared visiting Israel. Those from Israel, however, tend to travel all over the world. Each of them has been to Poland, too.

To sum up, traveling for tourist reasons is evidently not enough to build cognitive curiosity reflected in the desire to establish intercultural contacts, including the learning of new behaviors and cultural skills. It is interesting that Białystok students have never been to Israel or met its citizens so far. To the contrary, many of the respondents from Yehud have visited Poland, though these were usually organized trips to see the places of extermination, not to meet living people. Thus, the students from Israel also had limited opportunities to establish contacts with Polish youths and learn the Polish culture in the process of communication.

Conclusions

The presented diagnosis of competence may be helpful in planning activities related to intercultural communication, especially in extending the educational offer proposed at the meetings of young people from Białystok and Yehud. Finding out what the youngest generations know was also important in order to discover what they do not know, what has been hidden from them. It was key to find out the youths' attitude to the history: both Poles and Jews can see the need to learn what happened in the past. Many students are aware of how important for their identity is what happened to their ancestors. However, the declared readiness to take actions, engage in behaviors and intercultural contacts is very low, especially in the case of Polish students. This is alarming for educationalists specializing in intercultural education and motivates us to examine this problem more deeply. Apparently, students have few opportunities in the educational system to learn about the world by experiencing the places

of remembrance and communicating with their peers from other cultures. This may be the reason for the declared reluctance to meet young people from Israel. Whatever is unknown causes anxiety, which can be best overcome by applying interactive ways of communication.

The key to understanding yourself and identifying your resources and difficulties is to get back to the past and discover how your ancestors lived, what traumas they encountered, and what successes they achieved. It is important to discover both what we know about the previous generations and what we do not know, what has been hidden, forgotten, erased. Anne A. Schutzenberger (2017, pp. 225–226) calls such issues a “hot potato”, shameful, repressed facts, whose revelation may stop the passing of a trauma from generation to generation. Actually, the unwanted, shameful past does not disappear but comes back in the form of a spectrum of fears, diseases, anxieties and phobias in the following generations (Schutzenberger, 2017, pp. 51–52). Talking about the history of the family and locality and learning the broader context of the history of previous generations, what was going on in the country and all over the world, will reveal the hidden mysteries. This way we can stop the circle of a cultural trauma (Aleksander, 2010, p. 195), and we will no longer be under the influence of “family loyalty”, which is understood as unconscious consent to inheriting the trauma.

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