



## Living up to the intercultural education in a monocultural school. The case of Poland<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Since Poland joined the EU in 2004, intercultural education has become one of the fundamental goals of the Polish educational system. Many Polish educators believed that it was only through intercultural education that they would be able to teach students necessary skills which would support them in the transition to becoming truly multicultural and cosmopolitan. In other words, intercultural education was perceived as a must for post-socialist CEE countries in order to catch up with Western Europe. Our argument is that intercultural education has been created, developed and implemented in the specific context of Western, multicultural societies. However, our standpoint is far from negating its importance and role in education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. On the basis of a critical reflection on the Eurocentric approach within educational studies, the problem is outlined of teaching intercultural education “by dry run” in the context of Polish schools – i.e. teaching about global dependencies without a direct link with or presence of cultural “Others”, who are usually known only through the media and literary canon. It is indicated that this form of education often fails to serve its goal as it is frequently implemented in a one-sided way: by Polish educators, in monocultural schools, as narrations about Others rather than their presentations through the lens of their experiences, stories or methodologies and so considering the voices from outside the context of Central and Eastern European countries.

**Keywords:** intercultural education, Poland, monocultural school, education about “Others”, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), ‘leveraged pedagogy’

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## Introduction

Transformations taking place in the contemporary world have turned globalisation into a phenomenon most people are aware of, one that is present in nearly all aspects of daily life, and gives space for intercultural education (Lewowicki, 2021). This education aims to sensitize individuals and society to the situation of Others and to their contexts (Ogrodzka-Mazur, 2001). Since Poland joined the EU in 2004, intercultural education has become one of the goals of the Polish educational system. Many Polish teachers and educators believed that that it was only through intercultural education that they could teach students necessary skills that would support them in the transition to becoming truly multicultural and cosmopolitan. Intercultural education was perceived as a must in order to catch up with Western Europe.

Located in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Poland is one of the so called new EU member states that have been undergoing continuous post-socialist transition in order to fit into the West. One of the predicaments is creating a new national identity that would transpose the dominant discourse, according to which the West is 'civic', 'liberal', and 'good', while the East 'ethnic', 'populist' and 'bad' (Zubrzycki, 2001, p. 629). Intercultural education was believed to be the key to achieve this change, as "[it] views cultures as dynamic and evolving, warning against seeing culture as static and deterministic" (Sikorskaya, 2017, p. 9).

Intercultural education was developed as a tool of ideological change in EU countries and as an element of strategies designed by the Council of Europe and the European Union oriented towards integration and mutual understanding of diverse groups of EU residents and migrants (Pukin, 2019). In this article, intercultural education is addressed as a challenge for a monocultural post-socialist society (Nikitorowicz et al., 2001). The ability to implement intercultural education is one of the tests that CEE countries have to pass in order to move towards Western Europe. Our argument is that intercultural education has been created, developed and implemented in the Western context of multicultural societies (Forgahni-Arani et al., 2013). On the basis of a critical reflection on the Eurocentric approach within educational studies, the problem is outlined of teaching intercultural education "by dry run" in the context of Polish schools – i.e. teaching about global dependencies without a direct link with or presence of cultural "Others", who are usually known only through the media and literary canon. Due attention is drawn

to the failure to use this pedagogical tool as it is frequently implemented in a one-sided way: by Polish teachers and educators, in monocultural schools, as narrations about Others rather than presentations of them (with them) and their research, approaches, voices, theories, methodologies, or practices from outside the context of Central and Eastern European countries.

The article starts with an introduction to the context of implementing and developing intercultural education in Poland as an EU member state, and showing the complicated nature of intercultural education on the level of its definition (part of the global educational strategy), implementation of the theory and educational practices as well as its politicization. Then, the borderland nature of Poland is discussed, which, on the one hand, longs for what is Western and liberal, while on the other hand, clings to traditional, nation-centric categories of looking at and thinking about the closer and more distant world. In order to understand this contradictory nature, the practice is presented of implementing intercultural education in monocultural schools<sup>2</sup>, as well as the challenges and dilemmas it causes.

### **The complicated nature of intercultural education**

Global education, of which intercultural education is a part, is an unambiguous term. Jerzy Nikitorowicz explains global education as a new philosophical trend based on liberal perspectives and arising from globalisation processes in various areas of human functioning. He perceives it as education aiming to develop global citizenship, awareness of global problems and ways of solving them, to popularize achievements in science and global culture and to uproot xenophobia and prejudice (Nikitorowicz, 2009, p. 251). Hence, its definition as holistic and universal in the space of people's global and local functioning. Nikitorowicz also argues that "global education is sometimes treated as multicultural education which, through its fight with monoculturalism, introduced cultural pluralism to schools to compensate for educational deficiencies of children and adolescents from minority groups" (2009, p. 257). This important statement reveals its heterogenous nature, encompassing both majority and minority groups, including groups with refugee and migration background.

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<sup>2</sup> The term monocultural school refers to the little diversity (compared to Western EU countries) of Polish schools in terms of nationality, ethnicity and culture (this concerns both students and the teaching staff).

The implementation of global education topics on various levels of education, in different countries and in culturally and nationally diverse school and preschool environments, is carried out in a similar – non-homogenous and multidimensional – way. Practice of monocultural schools shows how many difficulties it poses. It is so because the content of global education and its assumptions can be (and often are) interpreted through the lens of one correct civilizational, cultural and world-view context (including religion). Moreover, its content is transmitted as knowledge “about others”, usually in a non-participative way, and so without the participation of individuals representing a particular country, culture or community. It would then be reasonable to carry out some research diagnosing teachers’ needs (and not only theirs) and ways in which this type of education is implemented in Polish schools as “dry-run” education.

The implementation of intercultural (and wider: global) education in Poland, strictly connected with the presence of Poland in the EU, is an embodiment of ideological postulates of education for sustainable development the aim of which is to transform the learning process and to educate conscious “global citizens” with the competences (e.g. global awareness) to actively participate in the “global civic society”. The basis for this message lies in *The 2002 Maastricht Global Education Declaration*, which is a peculiar global tool for the creation of European education policy remaining in the trend of globalization. It argues that the educational process “is not neutral in terms of world view, is not objective, unbiased or politically unengaged” (Jasikowska, 2011, p. 97).

The agreement on supporting the development of global education in Poland signed on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2011 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of National Education and Grupa Zagranica, officially acknowledged the importance of this type of education, including it in the curriculum of general education. Signed by several crucial (in terms of implementing global education) institutions in Poland, the agreement included an important element: a declaration relating to the introduction and application of the definition of global education.

The dialogue referring to the implementation of the postulates of global education in Poland (the abovementioned document being its result) was held within social consultations made possible through the cooperation between 30 different institutions and lasted several months. Among the participants of this process were representatives of the teaching staff, methodology counsellors and consultants, the Ministry of National Education, the Minis-

try of Foreign Affairs, education authorities, universities and NGOs. It was bottom-up work oriented towards creating a certain conceptual framework that could facilitate global educational activities (coherent with Poland's international involvement in developmental aid) in Polish schools in cooperation with non-governmental organisations.

### **Longing to the West**

It was the 1<sup>st</sup> May 2004 when Poland joined the European Union. In a referendum that had been organised a year earlier the vast majority of Polish citizens (77%) voted in favour of this. EU membership meant not only a symbolic break from the USSR umbrella of influence, but also raised high hopes for a better and more prosperous life. Since then, the next years have been marked with a permanent longing to catch up with the West(ern Europe). Even nowadays, with sweeping authoritarianism of the conservative right-wing Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Law and Justice] party that had managed to win the hearts and minds of Polish electors, the references to the West are still making headlines of political speeches. In fact, Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of this party, kept repeating that “Poles deserve a similar standard of living as in the West” (PolskieRadio24.pl, 2019), and they are “rightfully convinced that they deserve a similar standard of living as in the West” (PAP, 2021).

These two examples refer only to the economic dimension, yet the reference is clear and indicates the willingness to catch up. While culturally Poland is currently engaged in strengthening its national identity that is coined around the triad: ethnicity, Polishness and Catholic religion, back at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, catching up culturally and socially with the West had also been considered crucial. Only then could Poles be considered truly European. This narrative became the core of what Napiórkowski (2019) labelled as soft-patriotism. It had been about embracing European norms and values, looking optimistically towards the future, cosmopolitanism and openness, and blatant longing to be recognised by the “European Other” (Napiórkowski, 2019, p. 45). By entering the European Community Poland had chosen to embrace a new type of national identity – one that is based on common citizenship rather than ethnicity or tradition (Goździak and Márton, 2018), and is open and inclusive to others. Moreover, this way it could maybe move closer to the core of the EU from the semi-peripheral position that it has been occupying (Starnawski, 2015).

Longing for recognition by the “European Other” indicates the difficult position of Poland within the EU. While being formally within the EU, it still belongs to the Eastern part of Europe. As Spencer and Wollman argue (2002, p. 45), the division into the East and the West has never been purely geographical, but rather served as containers that could have been filled in with different content. In fact, Central and Eastern Europe was believed to be in a permanent state of transition for the last century (Szokolczai, 1996). However, after the collapse of the USSR, this transition acquired a new meaning – Central and Eastern Europe became an object of Western pedagogy and claimed to be in a state of permanent post-communism with the ultimate goal of catching up and becoming a part of the West (Kulpa, 2014).

The causes of this situation are very complex. Among crucial ones are: “difficult knowledge” and difficult collective memory referring to the partitions, two world wars, displacement, migration and refugeeism, and finally communism and socialism. Decades of destroying the cultural and ethnic diversity or treating it as folklore reinforced the antagonism and resentment between the majority and minorities as well as between minorities. Building on the opposition “us – them”, “in-group – out-group” and the fear of strangers, based on their stereotypical images repeatedly recreated in the media (Kofta and Narkiewicz-Jodko, 2014), have led to the demonization of foreigners (Pasamonik, 2017) and deepened further opposition to the division between the Global North and the Global South. This has laid down an uneasy ground for intercultural education in Poland. However, it is not the only problem. The other is the monocultural character of Polish schools.

### **Monocultural school**

Against the background of other EU countries Poland stands out as having very few members of national and ethnic minorities. Migrants and refugees make up only a few per cent of the 38 million population. Apart from migrants from the East (Ukraine, Belarus), other groups are barely visible in the public sphere, even though migrants and refugees have been relatively highly exposed in the media for political reasons, with the effect of reinforcing barriers, prejudice and fear of strangers (Pasamonik, 2017). All these elements make up a contradictive image of social and educational context in which the assumptions of global education are implemented. On the one hand, one deals with the implementation of the postulate of schools open for all, providing knowledge about diversity, multiculturalism and EU values. On the

other hand, one can see conservative, nationalistic education in monocultural schools, based not on the potential of similarities and diversity, but on highlighting differences and antagonisms. This trend is visible in core curricula (undergoing constant reforms) that change open schools into oppressive, traditional schools. In this kind of schools, there is no space or safe possibility to conduct lessons on diversity, or non-discriminatory education, which is so crucial for shaping students' and adults' global competences.

In 2008, the Year of Intercultural Dialogue was introduced by the Council of Europe. The foundation of the intercultural dialogue were intercultural competences that one had to acquire in the formal and non-formal educational framework (Pukin, 2019). Global education has been perceived as one of the ways of entering the European melting pot. As soon as Poland joined the EU, global education became part of the school curriculum (Dąbrowa and Markowska-Manista, 2010). It was an enormous challenge for the educational system not only because there was hardly any content available in the curricula that taught young Poles how to act as Polish nationals, rather than how to be European, but also due to the fact that openness and recognition of various minorities were relatively new phenomena in Poland (Walat, 2006, pp. 183–184). Other cultures were endorsed, and met with the interest of students and teachers.

Since most of schools lacked capacity to deliver classes in global education, this role was taken by NGOs which delivered educational workshops and activities in classrooms. Textbooks and brochures summarising essential knowledge about other cultures were prepared and published for teachers. Intercultural or International Days were organised at schools with students presenting more or less distant cultures and countries. Gradually, trainings in global education for teachers started to be implemented and a team of regional coordinators of global education was created. The coordinators were working for social change based on shaping social and civic competences in school education. Projects were initiated that aimed to raise teachers' competences in implementing global education during school lessons as well as to support students in implementing their own projects related to global problems (e.g. within global education week). These initiatives followed the premise that in the context of global education, the responsibility of schools is to raise learners' awareness of global interdependencies and so make students aware of the fact that with their attitudes, daily choices or absence of reactions, every person has impact on Others and their situation.

## Teaching intercultural education ‘by dry run’

While a lot of attention has been dedicated in global education to embracing other cultures and learning about them, Polish school has witnessed one significant challenge: lack of contact with multiculturalism or other cultures. The whole process of introducing global education has been done ‘by dry run’ – without any real exposure to other cultures, especially from outside Central and Eastern Europe (Górak-Sosnowska, 2016). The students who presented other countries during Intercultural or International Days at schools had never been to these countries, nor had they been living in another country for a longer period of time. The Internet might provide them with exposure to the outside world and people who live abroad, but this does not substitute developing intercultural competences (Wach, 2013). The teachers who supported them, or taught about other cultures, had similarly limited experiences.

Numerous questions arise here about the sources of contemporary teachers’ knowledge about cultural diversity, their possibilities of accessing reliable information and the most recent research or international literary fiction, and about the ways in which they verify the information. Róg (2015) indicates that Polish teachers who work in bilingual kindergartens lack relevant knowledge about the native and target culture to address culturally-marked situations. Moreover, intercultural education is absent from many available kindergarten teacher training courses offered by Polish HEIs. While this might be the dominant picture, some positive examples of teachers able to increase the intercultural competences of their students exist as well (e.g. Szczurek-Boruta, 2013; Suchocka, 2016).

Only the NGO sector had wider experiences, as it could build on expertise of travellers, volunteers, social workers who worked in other countries, or Poles (in rare cases, foreigners like in the case of the Foundation for Somalia) who had been working with the emerging migrant communities in Poland. Still, they were able to fill in only a small piece of the intercultural educational offer. The EU-funded programmes created a window of opportunity for schools and school teachers to collaborate in cross-cultural, international projects. However, many of these projects were focused on cultural facts approach (tales, food, flora, fauna of other countries), while school exchanges (e.g. via e-Twinning) were perceived primarily as a tool to learn a foreign language, rather than build intercultural awareness (Sowa, 2014,



p. 118). Moreover, foreign exchange programmes are still a rare opportunity for most students, and they are not focused on intercultural competences based on contact hypothesis, interaction and participation, but rather on factual knowledge (Sobkowiak, 2014).

The lack of cultural Others in the society and in school and the traditional style of teaching at Polish schools impacted the way global education content was delivered. It was more oriented to delivering knowledge about other cultures, making students familiar with cultural difference, rather than learning to live together (Kitlińska-Król, 2013, p. 284). The same applies to language textbooks, which also provide a declarative view of other cultures rather than engaging students in an intercultural dialogue and raising their cultural awareness (Sowa, 2014). According to Sobkowiak (2014), in secondary schools foreign languages are taught in a traditional way, via course books, teacher lectures and reading or listening materials in a particular foreign language. Importantly, knowledge “from the world” is still very rarely provided by representatives of particular countries, cultures or communities.

The monocultural nature of Polish schools does not only refer to students, but reflects the cultural monolith of teachers and staff working there. Apart from cultural assistants and foreign language teachers, foreigners are hard to find in this important professional group. Thus, the “dry run” implementation of global education is dealt with here, particularly in the case of intercultural content and without real representatives of an exemplary group, who could illuminate and explain the context related to, for example, the process of refugeeism, migration or slavery. If the goal of global education is to develop students’ critical competences and so ontological skills and epistemological assumptions of various viewpoints (Andreotti, 2011), discovering their sociocultural sources and possible consequences in local and global dimensions, let us reflect: to what degree is global education taught in monocultural schools global (Mincer, 2013) and to what extent does it go beyond the local and national discourse?

## Conclusions

Fernando Reimers (2009) writes about a “global competency”, defining it as the knowledge and skills which people need to understand the contemporary world and to integrate different fields, which will allow them to understand global events and create opportunities to solve them. Global competency also encompasses attitudes and a moral disposition which enable peaceful,

respectful and productive interactions with people from different geographical areas.

As signalled in the introduction, the skill of implementing intercultural education in schools and using its potential in the education of generations is one of the tests revealing the stage we (as a society) are at on our path from the local to the global opening to social and cultural diversity. “Dry-run” teaching of intercultural education, characteristic of this part of CEE, in the context of Polish monocultural schools and in the context of ongoing global changes (including the increasing migration movement), reveals a number of challenges and dilemmas. They particularly affect Polish students, who face knowledge at school which very often does not sensitize and does not match the reality. They are provided with knowledge which does not explain differences in education around the world, or protection and violation of human rights, or global dependencies – the knowledge which very rarely shows similarities between cultures and societies.

Moreover, intercultural education has become an unwanted, sensitive, or even conflicting element that goes against the newly designed curriculum which ought to cultivate traditional values in Polish children. Lewowicki (2017, p. 26) indicates that it is much harder to practice intercultural education in Poland nowadays due to the national-Christian ideology that dominates the mainstream discourse and sweeps into education. In an educational space that is *par excellence* exclusive and set to teach one dominant worldview, there is no place for other viewpoints, not to mention minorities and their rights.

The premises for intercultural education at mainstream monocultural Polish schools are as sparse as never after having joined the EU. Not only intercultural competences of teachers have not significantly increased in many cases, but also the atmosphere around intercultural education is getting more and more tense, while the (mis)use of migrants and refugees in political discourse puts an additional burden on introducing such topics in classroom. At the same time the capacities of individual teachers, schools, and educators to deliver a meaningful intercultural education have grown stronger. It was caused by several factors. One was the possibility to develop intercultural education through participation in student and school exchanges with the support of various programmes, often organized by the EU. Another one was necessity – Polish students who remigrated to Poland with their parents after having lived abroad, and migrant or refugee students who came to the class (Markowska-Manista, 2016). Often without proper institutional support,

teachers had to manage on their own how to efficiently acculturate these students into the classroom and create an inclusive environment. Moreover, the misuse of migrants and refugees in national politics proved to be a double-edged sword. Next to provoking many Poles against Others, it has also raised awareness of global issues and the importance of intercultural education. It has made intercultural education needed even more than before.

At the same time it seems that the future of intercultural education in Poland is still a political issue, just as it was at the start with Polish access to the EU. It has always been linked to the experiences of Western European countries. So while earlier it was a predicament of joining the West, now it is perceived as a “Trojan horse” that is implementing the values and norms contradictory to the authentic Polish ones. While the link to politics worked well for the development of intercultural education before 2012, it now does the opposite. A way out could be unlinking intercultural education from the Western multicultural framework, and making it a necessary subject on its own. In fact, Polish education has enough experiences with borderland and regional education which build up to the intercultural education experience. Perhaps this way intercultural education could be practiced not by dry run, but via the experience of a multidimensional (geographic, political, post-dependent, and finally concerning humanitarian and humanistic values) borderland.

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