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Intercultural Non-formal Education Issues on the Agenda of Polish Non-governmental Organizations – a Research Report

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present the results of the research on the issues discussed in the educational initiatives undertaken by Polish non-governmental organizations. The results of the scientific explorations presented in the paper are the outcome of the PhD research project *Intercultural Non-formal Education in Poland on the Example of Non-governmental organizations activity*.

The project included surveying 65 leaders of different non-governmental organizations from three cities with different cultural make-ups, i.e. Bialystok, Poznan and Warsaw. The study was conducted in 2010–2012 according to the eclectic research approach, which allowed gathering quantitative and qualitative data. Based on the analysis of the empirical material, the author of the article presents: the issues tackled in the initiatives carried out by Polish non-governmental organizations, the structure of their implementation and the types of activities undertaken (in view of the issues analysed). An outline of the research problems precedes the discussion on the research results.

Keywords: *non-governmental organizations, cultural diversity, intercultural non-formal education*

Introduction

Due to the systemic transformation in Poland and the consequent application of the rule of social personalism – a characteristic of any democratic country, accord-

ing to which establishing space for communities ideologically, professionally or regionally close to the human being is a priority- non-governmental organizations are becoming an increasingly important “social actor” (Lewenstein, Palska, 2004, 80). Therefore, they form the basis for a civil society. For over twenty years in democratic Poland, people from various foundations and associations have engaged in different types of initiatives such as educational, charity or cultural initiatives. They have sought social change and many times performed significant tasks that should have been the responsibility of governmental and municipal organizations.

Non-governmental organizations are also important agents, in many cases leading ones, as to the implementation of intercultural non-formal education. Thus, they meet the needs stemming from the socio-cultural diversity of local, Polish, European or global environments. We are witnessing dynamic transitions in this realm of education. Intercultural non-formal education is expanding the range of issues it is concerned with, which results from the ongoing cultural diversification of the country. Projects and programmes dealing with the issues about cultural, social, economic or biological types of otherness of the Aliens/Others, the close and distant ones, are conducted.

In this article, I will present the results of the study on the contents of the initiatives undertaken by Polish non-governmental organisations. The study is one of the elements of the PhD research project *Intercultural Non-formal Education in Poland on the Example of Non-governmental organizations activity*¹.

The Characteristic of the Research Problem

To different extents, the role of non-governmental organisations has been the subject of numerous social studies in Poland. However, the case of non-governmental organisations as implementers of intercultural non-formal education has not been discussed yet.

In designing my research I followed the assumption that the cultural diversification of Polish society has been a dynamic process. The process was brought about by the transitions in the final decade of the 20th century, i.e. the systemic transformation, recognition of the rights of minorities, Polish accession to the European Union and the Council of Europe and, consequently, opening the

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borders for immigrants from different countries. I made an assumption that the coexistence of numerous culturally different groups may be an advantage but it may well turn into a source of overt or covert conflicts. It is intercultural education above all that shapes intercultural relations. Therefore, it is an educational priority to prepare society for living in a multicultural environment, not only with the indigenous minorities who have lived in Poland for years, but also with foreigners who leave their homelands for various reasons. Hence, it is essential to develop intercultural non-formal education, i.e. a planned process of intercultural competence acquisition, taking place outside formal and obligatory education programmes, and, due to its character, enabling learning through experience and active participation.²

In my study, I focused on the cyclical activities³ in the field of intercultural non-formal education conducted in 2008–2010. The activities were to foster sensitivity to otherness, teach to tolerate and accept it, as well as to develop the ability to establish positive relations with the Alien/Other in the cultural, economic and biological domains. They dealt with the issue of cultural differences on local, regional, national and transnational levels: starting with local communities and concluding with the cultures of remote societies. The analysed projects and programmes helped individuals shape their cultural identities, taking into consideration indigenous values of their families, parish communities and the like. The activities were conducted in cooperation between educational institutions on local, regional, national and transnational levels.⁴ In this article, I attempt to answer one of the numerous research questions posed in my PhD research project: What are the intercultural non-formal education issues⁵ implemented by Polish non-governmental organisations?

In 2010–2012⁶, the research was conducted among the promoters of intercultural non-formal education from deliberately selected types of non-governmental

² The definition is the result of the analysis of Polish and English literature on the subject, e.g. the assumptions of the lifelong education concept, central to modern thinking about education, as well as features of non-formal education, the essence of culture (treated as a natural space for educational activities), and the idea of intercultural education.

³ These were the programs and projects implemented in different organizational forms such as educational workshops, training, international exchanges, study visits.

⁴ The subject of my research also included the assessment of the initiatives by the participants. In this article, I only present the core methodological assumption for the problem in question.

⁵ The term 'issue' is understood as the knowledge transmitted, acquired and created during educational activity.

⁶ The research started in the other half of 2010, and was completed in February 2012.

organizations – foundations and associations⁷ – in three cities with different cultural make-ups, i.e. Bialystok, Poznan and Warsaw. The study mostly included institutions whose statutory activity presupposed the implementation of intercultural education and encompassed topics such as education and upbringing, arts and culture, integration and social mobilization, and human rights. In the choice of a target group, random purposeful sampling was employed. The direct involvement in the initiatives as an initiator, as a coordinator or as a coach was the main criterion for the purposeful selection of the study sample.

In the research, the eclectic approach was adopted, which allowed for gathering quantitative and qualitative data. A diagnostic survey was the core research method. The techniques used included a two-part interview, a document content analysis, overt and covert participant observation, and non-participant observation. In the first part of the interview, a structured close-ended interview was employed and quantitative data about the actions taken by non-governmental organisations in the realm of intercultural non-formal education was aggregated. The other part of the interview contained open-ended questions, which complemented the information gathered through the close-ended interview.

In the course of the research, 65 interviews were carried out. 115 documents about the target initiatives were collected: paper and electronic versions of the programmes and projects, information folders, information retrieved from the Internet. 20 observations of the initiatives from Bialystok, Poznan and Warsaw were completed. The research findings are presented in this article for descriptive purposes, and to a lesser degree for the purpose of a statistical and quantitative inference.

Intercultural Non-formal Education Issues Introduced by Polish Non-governmental Organizations

All the leaders engaged in the Polish third sector declared that the idea of cultural otherness was included in the contents of the initiatives the leaders implemented. It entailed discussing the issues about having and expressing the minority identity by groups and individuals and the differences connected with it. 87% of the declarations confirmed working on the issues concerning social other-

⁷ The choice of the leaders of Polish foundations and associations as my study sample resulted from the fact that they accounted for the majority of non-governmental entities, and thus formed its core.

ness resulting from one's nationality or ethnicity and the social status it involves. 45% of the topics discussed were about biological otherness based on sex, age, eye, hair and skin colours, or physical/intellectual (dis)abilities. 75% of the declarations indicated that the topic of economic otherness, manifested by economic status and its consequences, was put forward. 35% of the interviewed leaders confirmed that their organizations introduced in the initiatives the issue of political otherness, i.e. the preferred worldview, ideology, doctrine.

As to the issues related to cultural and social otherness, 65% of the interviewed activists claimed that the implemented activities related to selected elements of the culture and identity of immigrants, e.g. the Africans, Vietnamese, Hindus, Chinese, and Japanese. This group of interviewees was mainly from Warsaw, which points to the fact that the above-mentioned issues were not popular in Białystok or Poznań. 50% of the interviewed leaders declared that the intercultural non-formal education initiatives they carried out included issues relating to the cultures of selected indigenous national minorities, e.g. Belorussian, Lithuanian, or Ukrainian minorities. 40% of the interviewees confirmed dealing with the cultures of ethnic minorities, mainly the culture of the Romani and Tartars. It is noteworthy that most activists from non-governmental organizations in Białystok declared that they were concerned with the cultures of national and ethnic minorities, which may have stemmed from the genuinely multicultural character of the city. 35% of the interviewed leaders said that they embraced the problem of refugee culture and the status of a *forced migrant*. This group mainly comprised people from Białystok and Warsaw. The contents of the initiatives referred to the situation and culture of Chechen people. In 32% of the cases, the initiatives dealt with faiths and religions, e.g. Islam, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Protestantism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. 10% of the answers gave evidence for the interest in the specificity of foreign languages (Spanish, Arabic, Georgian, and Romani) and the artificial Esperanto language. The interest in the issue of attitudes towards otherness, including discrimination mechanisms and prevention, was declared by 48% of the interviewees. 22% of the NGO activists said that the initiatives carried out by their organisations included the issues about intercultural education methodology and counteracting discrimination.

The statements of the interviewed leaders, the content analysis of the initiatives and the observation of the initiatives indicate that the issues relating to other cultures, religions and faiths as well as the identities connected with them, together with the issues about foreign languages and attitudes towards otherness constituted the thematic core of the initiatives conducted and determined their character. The issues concerning biological, economic or political otherness played a supporting

role. They served for a more in-depth explanation of discussed problems. For instance, the organizers of the teacher training *Vietnamese Children and Young People in the Polish Education System* – a part of the project *Five Flavours Cinema* organized by the *Arteria* Foundation – discussed the issue of cultural identity of Vietnamese immigrants, paying attention to their anthropological features and socio-economic standing as a supplementary analysis. The question of economic, biological and psychological aspects of otherness was an important element of initiatives devoted to refugees (mainly from Chechnya, but also from Afghanistan, Pakistan or Nigeria). It was also one of the core issues in the preparations for participation in international voluntary service programmes (EVS, missionary voluntary service).

The analysis of the empirical data has shown that although leaders declared that they had covered numerous topics about cultural otherness or the otherness of faith and religion, not all the topics underwent an in-depth examination. As the surveyed NGO leaders pointed out, some of the issues were only hinted at, which was due to time restrictions or the character of the initiatives. The situation was slightly different in the case of initiatives on attitudes that involved presenting participants with the mechanisms of discrimination and ways of counteracting discrimination. These initiatives dealt with the issues about attitudes towards otherness in the first place. The subject of biological, economic or cultural differences constituted the background for discussion. As to the international activities (international exchange programmes, international volunteer service, or work camps), beside the issues purposefully undertaken in the initiatives, spontaneously evolving topics about participants' religious or cultural affiliations created an essential background for discussion.

Types of Initiatives

Based on the empirical data, the issues prevailing in particular initiatives, and in relation to the *Holistic Concept of Intercultural Education* of J. Nikitorowicz (Nikitorowicz, 2005, 200–232), which in a comprehensive manner determines the thematic areas in the field of intercultural education, the following types of initiatives on the agenda of Polish non-governmental organisations can be distinguished:

Initiatives concerning the identity and cultural heritage of minority groups

This includes activities that focus on the issues relating to the symbolic and material heritage of national, ethnic, religious or language minority groups (including immigrants and refugees). The activities help to develop, in Poland and abroad, the minority identity and all the competence required for participation in the life of a particular national, ethnic, religious and language community. They also serve to create a ground for an intercultural encounter, which increases sensitivity towards the otherness of the majority group. The examples of this type of initiatives are: *The Multicultural Club* (The Society of Friends of the Maharaja Jam Sahib Digvijay Sinhji Public High School); “The Stories of the Terek Valley” (Cultural Practitioners’ Association); integration and educational activities for the Romani community (The Bahtale Roma Foundation)

Initiatives connected with the culture of the close Alien / Other

This group of initiatives deals with the issues concerning the culture and cultural heritage of the close Alien/Other, i.e. a member of a particular community (local, of a city, region or of Poland). The above-mentioned initiatives are mostly aimed at selected elements of culture, identity, faith and religion of indigenous minorities, who have lived in different regions of Poland for years. The initiatives concentrate on selected elements of the dominant culture and encompass the local, regional, national and international execution planes. Examples of the initiatives are: *The Meet Your Neighbour Project* (The *Poland-Ukraine* Socio-Cultural Association); *The Chronicles of Podlasie Region* (The *Ab-ba* Association for Children and Young People Learning Belorussian); *Multicultural Warsaw* (The *ProHumanum* Association for the Development of Civic Society).

Initiatives focusing on the culture and position of the distant Alien/ Other

This group of initiatives includes activities whose contents relate to the culture of the distant Alien/Other, who is a citizen of another country, continent, or an immigrant or a refugee with entirely diverse cultural affiliation. The activities show similarities and differences between the culture of the distant Alien/Other and the local, regional or national cultures. Examples of initiatives falling within this group are: activities introducing the culture and position of African people (The *Hear Africa* Foundation) workshops on cultural diversity for children (The Foundation of Intercultural Education); Hindu song classes (The *House of Lotus* Foundation).

Initiatives relating to the cultures of the close and distant Aliens/Others

This group of initiatives focuses on the close and distant Aliens/Others. This set of activities involves implementation of issues relating to different cultures, religions, faiths and the like. The implementation follows the pattern from close to distant otherness, but it also happens at random. Projects that belong to this group of initiatives are *Mobile School Intercultural Workshop Part II* (The Culture House Foundation); *The Living Library of the Greater Poland* (The Institute for Research and Development of Social Initiative); the Programme for the Development of Sensitivity Toward Otherness *The Adventures of the Other* (The Foundation of Education and Creativity, The University of Bialystok Foundation).

Initiatives concerning the attitudes towards the distant and close Aliens/Others

This set comprises the initiatives that deal with the problem of discrimination against the distant and close Aliens/Others and ways of counteracting it. The initiatives focus on the mechanisms of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. They also discuss the consequences of any discriminatory acts and the ways of counteracting discrimination. The issues about cultural, religious, biological or economic types of otherness are the plane for consideration. Examples of this type of initiatives are: anti-discrimination workshops for school children (The 9/12 Association for Dialogue); *Hominem Quaro – a quest for a human* (The Stop-Klatka Association of Culture Practitioners); and anti-discrimination workshops organized by The *Konsola* Women Association.

Initiatives on Jewish history and culture and Polish-Jewish relations

This group of initiatives focuses on the subject of the Polish-Jewish past and heritage, the Holocaust, Jewish culture and cultural ties resulting from the process of cultural interpenetration. They discuss the issue of Polish-Israeli relations and the character of the State of Israel. This set of initiatives includes projects such as *Restoring Matzeva* (The Association of Creative Initiatives “E”); *The School of Dialogue* (The Forum for Dialogue among Nations); *International Summer Camp* (the *Poland-Israel* Centre for Civic Education).

Initiatives focusing on the cultural affiliations of the participants

This is a set of activities discussing the elements of cultures of the people who participate in the initiatives. The main purpose of this kind of initiatives is mutual understanding and integration. Discussing the cultural affiliation of the

participants usually happens in the case of international initiatives (exchange programmes, work camps, volunteer work programmes). Initiatives include the following projects: *Let's meet in the kitchen* (the Aege European Forum of Students); the Polish-German encounters (the Polish-German Society for Social Education); *We love eating* (the Foundation for Freedom).

Initiatives focusing on the role of language in communication and promotion of other cultures

In this group of initiatives, the role of language in the process of intercultural communication and learning about other cultures is the centre of attention. Language is considered to be an intercultural communication tool and facilitator in the process of gaining knowledge of other cultures, nations as well as Polish history and culture. The activities are concerned with a particular language, a language family (e.g. Romance languages, or Slavonic languages), or the artificial Esperanto language. Example projects that belong to this group of initiatives are *Femina Republic* (The Sfera Foundation for Languages and Culture); *European Voluntary Service* (The Bialystok Society for Esperanto Speakers); educational activities carried out by The *En-senco* Socio-cultural Society of Ludwik Zamenhof.

Initiatives on interculturality and multiculturalism and the methodology of working with particular groups

This group of activities focuses on the culture, religion and position of the close and/or distant Aliens/Others, as well as intercultural education methodology. Its contents pertain to selected elements of the cultural canon/canons of minority groups, minorities' religions, methods of designing education activities, ways of addressing otherness, etc. Projects that can serve as examples of this type of initiatives are *Refugee Culture: cultural differences and ways of addressing them* (The Foundation of Culture and Creativity); *The Workshop of an Aspiring Teacher* (The Institute for Research and Development of Social Initiative).

Based on the research results analysis, it may be concluded that the contents of the intercultural non-formal education initiatives follow the holistic understanding of the concept of intercultural education. The activities undertaken dealt with many topics ranging from the cultures and problems of the close Aliens/Others to the issues of the distant Aliens/Others. The choice of the issues discussed in the initiatives was determined by the cultural character of a particular city. The initiatives focused on the cultures and problems existing in the given area but were not limited to these subjects only. The thematically widest range of initiatives e.g. initiatives focusing on the cultures of national and ethnic minorities, immigrants,

refugees, or other religions was developed by Warsaw non-governmental organizations that operate in the so-called Polish “multikulti” centre. Bialystok NGOs explored the topics about minority groups living in the city. They sometimes showed their interest in the issues concerning refugees, less often in the issues about immigrants or the distant Aliens/Others. The topics discussed in the Poznan initiatives were diverse, and structurally they resembled a mosaic. Therefore, it is difficult to discern the dominant ones. NGOs in all the cities included in their initiatives the issues about discrimination, its consequences, and ways of counteracting it. The situation was similar in the case of initiatives treating language as an intercultural communication tool that helps to learn about other cultures. Moreover, it was also the case with the international initiatives that facilitated the encounter with otherness and promotion of one’s own culture. The initiatives concerning Jewish culture, Polish-Jewish and Polish-Israeli relations were mainly introduced in Bialystok and Warsaw. All the issues enclosed in the initiatives of Polish non-governmental organisations gave the opportunity to develop multifaceted identity of the initiatives participants.

Conclusion

In Poland, intercultural non-formal education has been developing dynamically since the 1990s. Thanks to the social activeness of citizens themselves, a wide range of initiatives has been developed in the field of intercultural education. The character of intercultural education that assumes learning through experience and active participation, allows for the implementation of tasks on a number of topics, which in turn facilitates the intercultural dialogue. As the results of my research indicate, Polish non-governmental organisations introduced thematically diverse initiatives that alluded to the needs relating to the intercultural education on local, regional, national and transnational levels. The initiatives dealt with the issues about the Aliens/Others who live in the local community, Poland, Europe or the world as well as with the issues about attitudes towards otherness. In the course of the implementation of non-governmental initiatives the topic of non-ethnically conditioned types of otherness, i.e. biological, social or economic ones was raised. Although it was of supplementary character, it allowed for a more detailed analysis of the subject in question. The issues explored by Polish non-governmental organisations constituted a factor enabling the development of intercultural competence and readiness for encounter with the close and/or distant Aliens/Others.

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