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Regional education as the first step towards citizenship in Europe

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To preserve and continue one's culture is to transmit one's cultural heritage. The sense of the connection with former generations, the reliance on local traditions and the ability to create them for the future gives the effects of a strong heritage, not influenced by the trends or flood of the global, mass culture – cultural identity. Nikitorowich (2001) writes 'identity can be described as the meeting of the past, future and anticipated future. Getting to know about oneself in the world of mass culture is important. Besides understanding oneself it gives the chance to understand others, and it means intercultural integration.' This transmission concerns history, tradition, folklore and language.

A region is not only a geographical term, but an historical and cultural entity. Firstly, it is a specific generation's heritage, a community connected by material and spiritual links. It is also an important component of other cultural communities (both national and European). The region is also a space in which to live and work – an area forming characters, behaviours, making decisions about the civil functioning of ordinary people and finally, it is the source of training strategies for developing humans and their value systems (Zellma, 2001). Currently we are observing the renaissance of 'regionalisms', and this helps to revitalise activities in one's own environment. The transmission of cultural heritage takes place through the interception of the values present in the environmental and cultural surroundings. The region is a reality which roots the human beings in their closest community, culture and territory.

The bond with one's own region is important, which is why it is necessary to reconcile regional behaviour with universal, so they do not exclude each other. The formation of these behaviours – from the sense of cultural identity to the sense of identity with other more sophisticated identities – allows the individual to participate in various identities, such as the European. Regional education makes it possible for young people to learn about their own cultural heritage and regional tradition, to understand their values and in this way to strengthen regional behaviours. Learning about regional history and customs, and understanding the mechanisms of interpretation and cultural change, helps them integrate with the community. The connection with one's own region and its specific community gives young people a sense of safety, attracting them to changes in politics, economy and society. Strong positive regional behaviour makes it easier to cooperate with others, engaging people in creative and energetic activities in their small 'countries' (Siciński, 1996).

The essential task of regional education is to demonstrate and make possible the experience of regional values and traditions. This occurs by incorporating the values present in the immediate geographical, natural and cultural surroundings. Children should be given the opportunity to learn about their cultural heritage from very early childhood. This can be incorporated in every level of education. According to the Polish Ministry of Education curriculum recommendations (1995), teaching about cultural heritage should take place on the following basis:

- Education should use the neighbouring community (the ‘small motherland’) and the region to show and stress direct environmental examples through the whole process of education, and it should involve young people’s growth into the culture of their immediate surroundings.
- A deepening knowledge of the specifics of their surroundings, which helps to strengthen the sense of national identity. In the ‘small motherland’ not only the landscape, architecture and folklore are important, but also contacts with other people. All these components are taken into account in defining the emotional sphere and basic human conventions.
- Distinguishing the autonomous values of one’s own region leads to the establishment of a local identity and helps to enrich national culture with local values. This enables people to create patriotic behaviour.
- Distinguishing the values that have been directly adopted, noticing their sources, in other regions or cultural surroundings should lead to a sense of interdependence and of the flow of cultural values, and to esteem of values different to familiar and regional ones.
- Showing the presence of historical and present Polish culture in the development of other cultures and the influences of those on native culture: this forms a sense of tolerance towards cultural variety and difference (*Dziedzictwo kulturowe w Regionie*, 1995).

All these principles should lead to building a community for the future through the development of one’s own cultural identity. This is not only the responsibility of schools, but also of museums and other social agencies.

This paper is the result of a pedagogical project started as a part of the diploma essays for postgraduate studies organised at the University in Białystok. The course participants, teachers with many years of practice, were seeking to achieve the aims of the Ministry of Education. Working in local communities, they investigated pedagogical solutions to help their pupils form regional behaviours and make them aware of culture as ‘the totality of actions connected by ways of thinking, feeling, evaluating more or less formalised, accepted by the certain community, so serving it – as a structural and symbolic system – to constitute and develop the whole’ (Markowska, 1990). Such solutions would ensure that culture is a developing structure, with common agreement, freely shared and not an inborn attribute of civil life, which does not change from generation to generation. The sense of a functioning culture, achieved through the realisation of the pedagogic projects, would help students in constructing cultural identity, following Erikson (1950), as a dynamic process, the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’, based on a subjective, chosen past – cultural tradition and anticipated future – and the active search for individual and social development with the concern of changing social, political and cultural reality.

The projects presented are answers to the need to develop children’s multicultural identity within the different regions.

- Borderline areas, where since the beginning of settlement groups of present-day Byelorussians, Poles, Ukrainians, Tartars and Jews have been living together.

Cultural symbols and elements of their traditions are still present in the cultural landscape of the region. Until recently state education policy did not allow for the use of these educational advantages of the values of the history and fortunes of the region. The system of education was unified: pedagogical targets and traditions were defined centrally, and textbooks were the same in content and nature, avoiding cultural pluralism and its importance in shaping individuals open and competent in multicultural communication. Nor did they acknowledge the multicultural heritage in the formation of cultural identity.¹

- The culturally homogeneous area of central Poland was where the education curriculum for cultural upbringing was prepared. This resulted in the disappearance of regional identity and traditions from the curriculum. The effects observed include strong ethnocentric behaviour and underestimating local traditions and their use in constructing the cultural identity of the local community.²

A distinctive past, cultural traditions, social experience and the unified system of education in schools created a state ideology that led to educational and cultural problems at the very moment of changed social reality and the formation of a new Europe, different in various regions.

Regional education is based on the area's socio-cultural potential and cannot be the result of ideology alone. It should use local potential. Schools and teachers must cooperate with territorial community centres and encourage the authorities to do the same. Some lessons should take place outside the school, and all lessons should take account of the child's perceptive abilities and be through active methods. The teacher and others should cooperate with pupils and should accompany them, rather than instruct and equip them with knowledge. In the process of regional education it is important to stress a partial and contextual interpretation rather than generalisations. The aim is that, through local references, the child is ready to participate in many cultural circles and able to discover his/her 'social ego' in different contexts. Regional education is sufficient for the child's need for a national identity and has to solve the child's genuine problems connected with their social identity.³

Various examples of work on regional education will now be discussed. Each project is an example of creative interpretation, the use of the socio-cultural potential of the environment and the forming of behaviours of openness and of interest in the world. These projects take into account not only the work of a group of children, but also the specific school's curriculum and educational activities.

¹ Misiejuk D., Doctorate Final Thesis (1999), Uniwersytet w Białymstoku

² M.A. Final Thesis led by D. Misiejuk at the Uniwersytet w Białymstoku in 2000-2003

³ see. Edukacja regionalna. Z historii, teorii i praktyki (1990) ref. Michalewska M T., Kraków

Project 1. Creating traditions⁴

Zabłudów is a small town situated 18 km from the large city of Białystok. Its social function is limited to being a quiet suburb of the city. It is difficult today to find any cultural importance of the town for its inhabitants: its great history and cultural wealth have almost disappeared from local knowledge. The lack of historical traditions, rich folklore and famous people can be observed. The only advantages, according to the inhabitants, are clean air, beautiful landscapes, and interesting and mysterious places. During work on the project, local people wrote poetry, painted, danced and performed in their amateur theatre – they have their passions and they can influence others with them.

The curriculum for regional education in Zabłudów was compiled from these elements. Learning about regional values, getting people to recognise them, the ability to notice and present collected materials were the main aims of our activities. Each task was completed with a ‘product’, which might be publications, school and town exhibitions or multimedia presentations. At the time of the project, regional education was naturally linked with European education. Europe as a cultural category as well as a social and economical organism became more defined and interesting from the pedagogical point of view. The majority of the tasks were undertaken as projects, because it allowed the involvement of teachers with different specialisations.

Project 2. History, tradition and identity⁵

Each community is characterised by some features and also by its difference from others. Awareness of it develops not only from living in the area, using the same language and creating the same culture, but of having the same cultural traditions, whose values are commonly accepted and transmitted from generation to generation. This transmission, so important for preserving the identity of each community, is a very difficult process, particularly today, where transmission mechanisms have been violated. The picture of the family and local community has changed, and the common group identity has also been transformed.

The process of regional education in this primary school in Szczuczyn was concentrated on the history of the monuments in the town. The tasks to be realised were building the identity and the importance of local history for the social identity of the individual, and appreciating the importance of the historical and cultural heritage. Thanks to studies on the history of architecture and the artistic values of the monuments, the students internalised the values of their cultural heritage, which gave them a sense of identity. It was important in this project to use active methods. The teacher helped students to interpret the meanings and symbols which children noticed during their excursions or while drawing some parts of the buildings or reading the commemorative boards etc. The teacher’s help was also indispensable in locating historical events in the history of

⁴ discussed on the basis of Radziwońska J.U. M.A. Final Thesis, *Ziemia Zabłudowska moją małą ojczyzną*, Uniwersytet w Białymstoku, 2003

⁵ Discussed on the basis of Szymanowska H., M.A. Final Thesis, *Tożsamość kulturowa ludności z perspektywy historii Szczuczyna*, Uniwersytet w Białymstoku, 2003

the whole country and in Europe, but it was really important that the aims were realised by the children's own activities.

Project 3. Regionalism and multicultural⁶

The Polish north-eastern border is characterised by cultural pluralism. In Gródek, which is one of the oldest settlements in what is now Białostoczczyzna, three big ethnic groups have historically existed together: Jews, Poles and Byelorussians. Only the latter two live here today. Gródek is a strong cultural centre for Byelorussians. Inter-group contacts and fortunes have been common for many centuries, although not always on the same level, based on cooperation. The traditions of one group were not the source for others.

In the Gródek pedagogic project the aim was to teach and sensitise children to the various traditions of their neighbours. The town itself became the area, the so-called laboratory for gaining children's experiences, shaping their cultural sensitivity and developing their ability to understand cultural codes. The programme of regional education was implemented in the school's developmental curriculum. All year round the children absorbed it through excursions, via competitions, meetings with famous people etc. After some time the children started to notice Gródek's multicultural values and to appreciate them. They could observe the differences and they estimated them positively. They saw their friends, not only on the basic level of contacts - people who are liked, or not - but also as people with different traditions who were important for them. Finally, the children started to discover the common heritage of Gródek.

Project 4. Traditional crafts and the present⁷

The issue of regionalism was introduced into the educational curriculum in the form of an educational 'path' understood as the 'set of contents and abilities concerning important upbringing issues'. The question of regionalism has been described as a mediator between family, patriotic and social upbringing, showing the connections and the need for continuity in education.

Project Four concerned a school trip to places where traditional craftsman has been present for centuries. The opportunity of spending the whole day in a place where the inhabitants are occupied with their craft and the whole village is famous for its rich traditions, and the opportunity of talking to the craftspeople and trying the craft for themselves, was a wonderful way for creating a vision of implementing traditional crafts in today's world. It was also a first lesson about the craftsman and the economy. The place where the children went to 'experience' this regional education is Czarna **Wieś Kościelna**. This typical working settlement, situated in the middle of **Knyszyńska** Wilderness, has a rich history: the changes in its development and demography, and in

⁶ Based on Bielawska E., M.A. Final Thesis., *Wielokulturowość gminy Gródek w pracy Publicznego Gimnazjum w Gródku*, Uniwersytet w Białymstoku, 2003

⁷ Based on Wiater E., M.A. Final Thesis., *Edukacja regionalna na przykładzie ginących zawodów – garncarstwa i kowalstwa w Czarnej Wsi Kościelnej*, Uniwersytet w Białymstoku, 2003

economical function, are typical for the village on the borderline. Important historical events took place here. Through the history of their village students can 'touch' the history of the nations of the borderline and the history of the creation of the Polish state. The history of Czarna Wieś Kościelna is a kind of laboratory of economic mechanisms and their influence on the inhabitants' lives.

Project 5. Tastes and smells: traditions of regional cuisine⁸

The aim of this project was to examine the cultural variety of the region through its culinary traditions. Cuisine reflects differences in culture, and is also an element of integration. Its language makes it possible to communicate without borders. The invited guests represented different cultures. They spoke about the cultural symbols of their own ethnic groups, explaining how to interpret them and how important they are to them. Some of the symbols offered for interpretation were a stud farm (the Tartars from Podlasie); elements of interior design, e.g.: a stove (Byelorussian culture) or traditionally embroidered tablecloths (the Ukrainians), and finally the way of laying the table and the objects needed for preparing the Jewish Sabbath table.

This part of the project had been prepared with the cooperation of the teachers before the meeting. The students were to find traditional recipes and to cook the dishes. The guest's task was to complement their efforts by teaching about varieties from the children's point of view. The effect of the project was to discover the sense of identity, multiculturalism and learning about differences from their own symbolic culture. What is more, they certainly learned how to prepare the dishes!

Regional education - knowledge about the region, its history and the sense of tradition - helps to strengthen regional identity. This should enable young people to understand local traditions and become the base for behaviours full of openness and accepting of differences. It should prepare them to perceive the world as the potential of individual development and to create behaviours ready for different interpretations of regional culture. Regional education must not only be a spontaneous activity or innovation; it must become permanent in every 'open' school. The issues of opening regional education workshops and popularising amateur artistic movements should also be considered. The methods of introducing regional education used in the projects discussed here seem to have proved most effective.

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⁸ discussed on the basis of Ciesielska E., Final Thesis, Smaki i zapachy. Tradycje kulinarne naszego regionu, Uniwersytet w Białymstoku, 2002

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