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Promoting tolerance for other cultures at school: an example of an experimental class and a test of its effectiveness

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Despite the fact that Poland is not a multicultural country, the question of our tolerance for other cultures and religious systems is more and more widely discussed. Many scientific publications raise the question of prejudice and of the stereotypes which influence both adults and children in their perception of representatives of other nations. Our research (Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz et al. 1999) indicates that Polish teachers, including those working with the youngest children, find this problem important and are willing to introduce knowledge about other cultures into the school curriculum. They also emphasise the role of psychological education, which may help to promote attitudes of tolerance among children.

This paper presents a program of school studies for younger pupils (aged 7 – 11). The program consists of two parts, aimed at developing both the child's awareness of being a member of a given nation and a sense of tolerance and of the need for harmonious co-existence with others. Selected sections of this program were introduced experimentally to a primary school in Olsztyn, in a class of 9-year-old children. The pupils' opinions on other cultures were analysed before and after its introduction, and the changes in opinions that were observed are interesting.

Methodology

The workshop was conducted at Primary School No.15 in Olsztyn – a city in north-eastern Poland. The results of previous studies (Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz et al. 1999, Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz 2001) show that in this region young children have only sporadic and usually superficial contacts with people of other nationalities (for example, they do not play together). The present experiment was carried out in Class IIc, consisting of 26 pupils aged 8-9 years.

Changes in children's attitudes

Before the workshop, a randomly selected sample of 13 pupils were questioned individually to determine the children's attitudes towards different cultures. After the workshop the remaining children were asked the same questions (post-test). A comparison between the opinions of children from the pre-test and post-test groups was expected to reflect the effectiveness of the workshop. However, we had to take into consideration the fact that the children came from one class and that the teacher had already talked to them on a few occasions about openness to other cultures and religious systems. We therefore decided to test the effects of the module in second way. A short additional study examining attitudes towards representatives of other nations was conducted with most of the pupils from the post-test group, which constituted the experimental group. The same study was conducted with a control group of 10 children of the same age from another class at the school, who had not taken part in any similar workshop. This allowed the verification of the workshop results in two ways: 'intra-group' (pre-test vs. post-test) and 'inter-group' (experimental vs. control).

When the test was completed, we talked to the pupils about participation in experimental classes of this kind.

Workshop: what does it mean to be different?

The workshop in its original form was developed by Beata Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz. Some of its components were changed, and new elements were added, by Małgorzata Zielińska and Agnieszka Spikert. Space does not allow a full description of the workshop: here we only present an example of the program.

Group discussion

This is led by the teacher. The teacher and pupils discuss “*What does it mean to be different?*” The aim of the discussion is to activate children’s personal knowledge and experience about different characteristics. By exchanging ideas and experiences, children stimulate each other to think about the problem.

Other discussion topics are:

- How do you recognise a different person? Does he/she have any special features?
- Have you ever met a different person? Why was he/she different?
- Have you ever felt different from others? How would you describe your feelings?
- Imagine that two boys come to your class. One is German – he lives not far from the border with Poland. The other is African and comes from Ethiopia. Is one of them more different than the other? If so, what makes him different?
- If you wanted to learn something new, which boy could teach you more – the German or the Ethiopian? Why?
- Who would the effects of this learning/teaching process depend on – you or this boy?

The teacher reads a story by Andersen - The Ugly Duckling.

Individual work

The teacher gives the children individual worksheets and asks them to prepare a conversation with a pre-school child (4 years old) about the story. How would they explain to him/her why the duckling was unhappy? When the task is completed, the children read and compare their texts. The teacher draws out different aspects of the duckling’s situation.

Group discussion

The teacher and children discuss the duckling’s situation. Examples of discussion topics :

- Why was the duckling different?
- Would it be possible for the duckling to become similar to other ducks?
- Would it be possible for the duckling to be happy among the ducks despite the differences?
- Could the ducks help the duckling to feel happier? How?
- Do people like those who are different? Why/why not?
- Have you heard about cases of discrimination in the world?

Children work in small groups

The teacher divides the pupils into small groups (4-5 children in each). Each group chooses its name and a leader. The leader writes down the results of group work on a group worksheet. The teacher tells each group “Three boys come to your class: an African, an American and a Russian. Work out a game you can play together“. When the task is completed, the children present their games.

Children play together

The children choose one of the games and try to play it. Three children pretend to be foreigners, the other are Polish. When the game is over, the children exchange their impressions.

Discussion

The teacher leads a discussion about similarities between people. Examples of discussion topics:

- Why are you able to play together?
- How can you understand the rules of the game despite language differences?

Verification of the workshop’s effectiveness

The workshop results were analysed in two ways – by comparing the opinions expressed by the pupils before and after the workshop (internal, intra-group study), and by comparing the attitudes of the children who have and have not participated in such a workshop (external, inter-group study).

Internal study

The study was carried out on an individual basis. Two sets of questions were used: the first examined the children’s views on members of other nationalities (‘declarative level’); the second concerned the attitudes they assume in concrete situations (‘procedural level’). Both sets of questions were of a descriptive character, because their aim was to describe or predict certain patterns of behaviour rather than evaluate them.

The results indicate that the pupils from both groups show a high degree of tolerance at the declarative level. Almost all of them answered affirmatively the question: *Would you like to play with children of different nationalities?*, both before and after the workshop. The great majority (irrespective of the group they belonged to) declared willingness to share a desk at school and live in a close neighbourhood with children from other countries. However, the pupils from the experimental group were more oriented towards interpersonal contacts and the reasons they gave were more elaborate (Table 1).

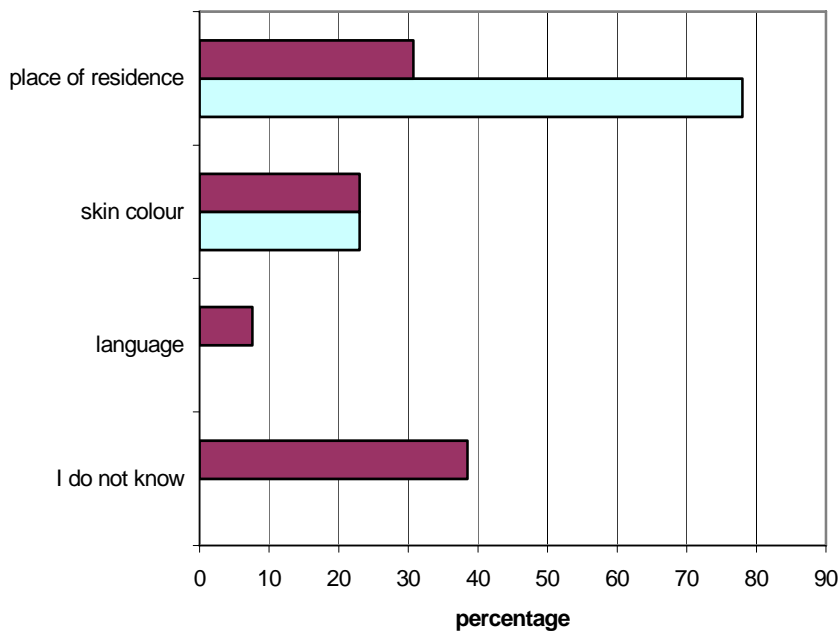
Table 1 Opinions about other nationalities formulated at the declarative level before and after the workshop

| Pre-test group No workshop | Post-test group After the workshop |
|---|---|
| <i>Would you like to share a desk at school with a child from a different country?</i> | |
| 84.6% YES | 77% YES |
| <i>I could:</i> -learn the language -make a friendship -have a new experience | <i>I could:</i> -learn the language -make a friendship -have a new experience -get to know a different culture -learn something new -help my new friend with problems at school |
| <i>Would you like children of different nationalities to live in a close neighbourhood?</i> | |
| 84.6% YES | 77% YES |
| <i>I could:</i> -play with them | <i>I could:</i> -play with them, talk to them - get to know a different culture - have a new, interesting experience - learn the language |

As can be seen in Figure 1, as many as 38% of the pupils from the pre-test group were not able to answer the question *What does it mean to be of different nationality?* After the workshop the children's opinions were more polarised.

The study of procedural attitudes - connected with the children's everyday experience and description of other people's behaviour - was conducted using four photographs. These showed a Romanian boy (the Romanians being a significant national minority in Poland); an Arab boy with a turban on his head; a white boy (similar to Polish children); and a black boy from Africa. After being shown the photographs the pupils from both groups were asked the following questions:

- *What do you think about each of the boys?*
- *How do you think, which of them would be the best in maths?*
- *Which of the boys could teach you something interesting?*
- *Which of they boys could learn something new from you?*
- *Imagine that your parents left for the weekend and you were invited by each of the boys to spend this time with him. To which of them would you go most willingly?*

Figure 1 Categories used by the children to describe other nationalities before and after the workshop

In some questions we did not manage to avoid evaluation, but this was of secondary importance. First, we tried to make the pupils characterise the boys (what they are like, what they do, what abilities they possess) rather than evaluating them as being 'good' or 'bad'. Both the children's opinions and the arguments they used appeared to be governed by stereotypes. Most of the children believed in the high competence of the white boy and wanted to spend their free time with him (Table 2). On the other hand, they were open to contacts with the boys representing little known cultures – Arab and African. Many of the pupils declared readiness to learn more about the customs of these nations, and to tell the boys about their own culture. The lowest degree of openness was observed in the case of the Romanian boy, which confirms the results of previous research on prejudice and stereotypes in the perception of others (Weigl, 1998; Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2001). Participation in the workshop had no significant effect on changes in the children's attitudes.

Table 2 Positive opinions about children of different nationalities formulated at the 'procedural level' before and after the workshop

| Question | Romanian boy | | Arabian boy | | Polish boy | | African boy | |
|--------------------------|--------------|------|-------------|------|------------|------|-------------|------|
| | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | Pre | Post |
| 1. What do you think...? | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 8 | 8 | 4 | 3 |
| 2. maths | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 8 | 9 | 3 | 0 |
| 3. I could learn... | 2 | | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 8 | 11 |
| 4. He could learn... | 4 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| 5. weekend | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 7 | 2 | 4 |

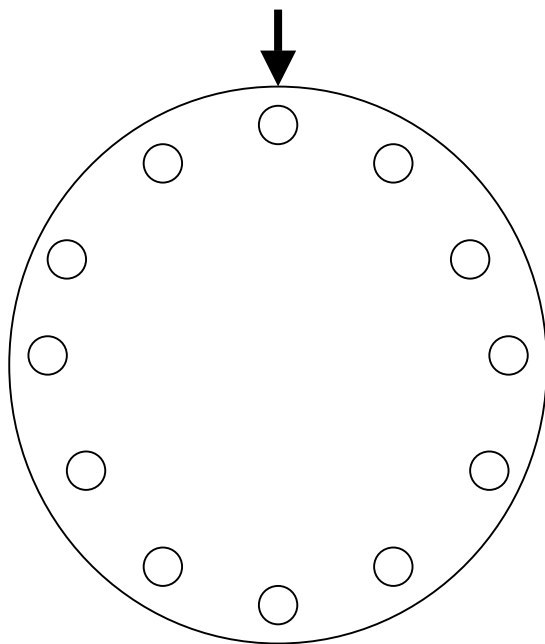
External study

This study was based on the examination of evaluative attitudes. Opinions expressed by pupils taking part in the workshop (experimental group) were compared with those formulated by the control group children from the other class at the same school, who had not participated in the workshop. Each group comprised 10 children who were questioned individually, and asked to complete two tasks. The four photographs discussed above were used in both of them.

The aim of the first task was to determine the level of social distance, which was measured employing the 'clock method'. The children were given photographs of the four boys and a picture showing the face of a clock, with 12 places corresponding to the 12 hours. They were told: "Imagine you are in camp. We have 12 tents. One of them (at the position of 12 o'clock – Figure 2) belongs to you. Which tents should the boys from the photographs occupy? Mark it in the picture"

The other task was aimed at examining the perception of particular nationalities from the perspective of their 'good' and 'bad' qualities. Again, the pupils were given the four photographs and two kinds of paper – black and white. They were told: "White sheets represent people's good qualities, black ones are for people's bad qualities. First think of yourself and take white or black sheets for as many virtues or faults you have. Now think of the four boys from the photographs. Take as many white and black sheets as you need to represent their merits/shortcomings in your opinion".

Figure 2 ‘Clock method’ of measuring the social distance: me-the others



The results of both tasks are presented in Table 3. The distance in Task 1 was measured on a scale from 1 (minimum) to 6 (maximum). The number of good and bad qualities in Task 2 corresponded to the number of white and black sheets of paper (there were 30 sheets of each kind).

Table 3 Average level of the social distance declared, and good and bad qualities attributed to, members of other nationalities in the group that have and have not participated in the workshop

| Question | Me | | Romanian boy | | Arabian boy | | Polish boy | | African boy | |
|----------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------|--------------------|
| | Control Group | Experimental Group | Control Group | Experimental Group | Control Group | Experimental Group | Control Group | Experimental Group | Control Group | Experimental Group |
| Distance | xxx | xxx | 3.1 | 2.6 | 2.9 | 2.1 | 3.7 | 1.8 | 2.9 | 2.5 |
| Good qualities | 7.1 | 8.1 | 4.9 | 5.9 | 4.8 | 10.1 | 5.2 | 10.5 | 3.9 | 9.2 |
| Bad qualities | 3.8 | 3.0 | 4.3 | 4.0 | 2.3 | 3.6 | 3.7 | 3.0 | 3.1 | 1.6 |

The results indicate clear differences between the views presented by the pupils who took part in the workshop and those who did not. The children from the experimental group postulated a much lower level of distance (2.25), compared with those from the control group (3.2). Moreover, they displayed a tendency to emphasise the merits of other people rather than their shortcomings. The average number of good qualities attributed to members of different nationalities was 8.9 in the experimental group, and 4.7 in the control one. The number of bad qualities showed a similar difference: an average of 3.7

in the control group and 3.2 in the experimental group. The children from each group perceived themselves in a similar way. However, those who did not participate in the workshop 'favour' themselves over others and claim to have very many virtues (about 33% more than the others). The pupils from the experimental group did not show any preference for themselves.

Conclusion

This paper presents an attempt to introduce a workshop promoting tolerance for other cultures at school. The multicultural information contained in the syllabus in Poland is dry and uninteresting. It helps to widen the pupils' knowledge about different countries, but does not always encourage changes in their attitudes towards the citizens. The results of previous studies (Weigl, 1999; Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz et al. 1999; Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2001) show that Polish children seem tolerant at the declarative level, but at the procedural level (especially when asked to evaluate) their perceptions of other nationalities are based on prejudice and stereotypes. They also use Poland-oriented arguments and glorify West European states.

The workshop results indicate that it had no significant effect on the children's opinions of a declarative nature, although these became more complex and elaborate, and an increase in the number of mental and verbal categories applied to describe members of other nations was also observed. Procedural opinions, based on the characteristics of other people, did not change much either: the attitudes demonstrated were typical of children at this age. However, considerable changes were noted at the evaluative level. The children who took part in the workshop evaluated representatives of other nationalities much more positively. Participation in the workshop changed not only their perception of others, but also of themselves: the pupils from the experimental group evaluated themselves as more similar to other children and were ready to diminish the distance in contacts with them.

We should not expect a single workshop, lasting only a few hours, to radically change children's attitudes, but there are several reasons why such attempts should be made. They develop a tradition for this kind of workshop, create the need to participate in such classes among children, and inspire teachers to improve their techniques and methods. Testing the effectiveness of these modules, although not always bringing the expected results, enables us to understand how children's views of other people are formed and suggests the ways expanding them.

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