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## **Multicultural education in Poland – case studies of good practice**

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### **Background**

Before 1989, multicultural education was an abstract concept for most of the teachers in Poland. This was a result of the assimilation practices of the communist authorities, who denied the existence of national or ethnic minorities in our country (Simoncini, 1998). However, Polish society has been differentiated for ages, maybe not in the way many European countries regard as cultural diversity, but there have always been different regions with their own customs and dialects, ethnic, national and religious minorities, sexual minorities, different social classes and people with special educational needs. The fact that Poland is a rather homogeneous country in respect of nationality does not mean that multicultural education is superfluous subject. On the contrary, in being isolated for decades, Polish society has learned to take a very ethnocentric point of view, which should be now rejected and replaced with a more diverse evaluating system (Knopff-Muszyńska, 2005).

Since 1989, Polish society has been facing many changes resulting from the fall of communism. Numerous reforms have been implemented aimed at supporting the development of a modern democratic state. Among them was a reform of the educational system, started on September 1, 1999. This reform influenced many aspects of the education process, increasing the teachers' autonomy in the classroom (Komorowska, 2002). As a result, the teachers are now allowed to decide the teaching and assessment methods and define individual curricula. This is a big shift in educational policy, since before the reform there was a common teaching programme and the same textbooks for all students in Poland. There are still many gaps to fill, especially in the field of multicultural education. For instance, the situation of immigrant children is still unclear. The Polish schools seem to be insufficiently prepared to meet the educational needs of foreign children coming to Poland. There are more and more immigrant and refugee children from former Soviet Union countries, from South-East Asia and refugee children. (Kepińska, 2003). There are also the children of a constantly growing number of foreign company workers residing in Poland on a temporary basis, who are entitled to enter ordinary Polish schools. Unfortunately, the education system, even if reformed, is still inflexible and has not adjusted to the presence of foreign children having no grasp of Polish language.

From this perspective, all initiatives aimed at promoting ideas of tolerance and appreciation of diversity among people should be highlighted and disseminated. During the course of the TEAM in Europe project we examined and described six case studies of good practice in teacher education addressing multiculturalism in Europe. Below we present two of them: the Roma children education programme implemented in a primary school in Olsztyn and the activities of the "One World Association", aimed at promoting openness for any kind of diversity within the society.

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### **Examples of good practices in teacher education**

#### ***The programme for the Roma children's development in the Primary School n° 2 in Olsztyn***

The aim of the programme is to support Roma children attending the primary school in Olsztyn in many aspects of their development, both physical and mental. The programme covers issues related to children's health, living conditions, intellectual, emotional and social skills with regard to their individual potential, preferences and cultural or national specificity.

The teachers' activities undertaken in the school are part of the governmental programme for the Roma community in Poland, which is going to be introduced throughout the country in the years 2004 – 2013. The fundamental goal of the programme is to lead the Roma minority into full participation in public life. It is of great importance to give Roma children a chance to belong to society but at the same time to support them in saving their identity and cultural distinction (MSWiA, 2003)

The Roma community is treated in Poland as a national and ethnic minority, and as such it is entitled to receive full protection and assistance from the State, in accordance with international agreements signed by Poland and its national legislation (MSWiA, 2001). The Constitution guarantees universal and equal access to education for all citizens so many efforts are made to encourage the Roma children to take advantage of it.

The Primary School N°2 in Olsztyn started Roma pupils' education in 1999. At the beginning Roma pupils were assigned to special so-called "*Roma classes*", separated from the school life and criticized for offering very low levels of teaching. The attendance rate in these classes was low and the effects of the education were rather poor. Looking for another solution to this problem, in 2004 the school authorities decided to follow the Pilot Government Programme for the Roma community in Małopolska Province for 2001-2003. The programme is to be implemented in 2004-2011. In the school year 2004/2005 it encompassed 33 pupils aged 6-17 (grades 0 to 6).

#### *Multicultural Dimension of Education*

The education of Roma pupils is regarded as the most powerful mean to integrate them into Polish society. For many years, public opinion polls have confirmed the existence of a strongly rooted negative image of Roma people, largely based on stereotypes and prejudices. This perception comes as a result of very limited recognition of the Roma community and social isolation of its representatives. This situation causes the need to arrange the educational system in order to overcome the many obstacles arising from cultural and social differences between Roma and Polish societies.

In Primary School N°2 in Olsztyn the educational process has two main aims. Firstly to attract Roma pupils to school and raise their education levels, and secondly to improve Polish-Roma relations by promoting attitudes of openness toward each other's cultures.

*Organization of the Roma educational process*

The major problem of Roma education is that many children do not attend school regularly, if at all. This is mostly because Roma parents do not accept the importance of schooling and regard school as an institution that is repressive of Roma identity. This is why the programme offered includes Roma culture and engages parents in the educational process. Roma pupils are encouraged to develop their skills in non-formal activities such as singing and dancing, and to participate in contests and festivals (sometimes together with their parents).

Teachers try to create a warm and supporting school environment to decrease the pupils' absence. They emphasize pupils' educational achievements in order to improve their motivation to work. There are also other attempts made to attract pupils, like the 'school attendance competition' between Roma children. Each month the winner is awarded a diploma and a little surprise, for instance a horse-drawn sleigh ride.

The teachers strive to integrate Roma customs and rules within the school. So for example, pupils can speak their national language but they also have to speak Polish during lessons. The educational process is focused on integration so it is developed to incorporate the Roma pupils into ordinary classes as soon as possible. Only pupils with very poor Polish language skills and large education gaps stay in a separate class. Currently there are 6 pupils there, out of 30 attending the school.

The education of the Roma pupils is carried out with the support of a special team. Its members are the 'supporting teacher', Roma parents as teacher assistants, the school pedagogue, the school speech therapist, and the teachers working in grades 1-3. Additionally, many teachers from the school completed the basic training course 'The Roma child in a school', to better deal with Roma pupil education.

The 'supporting teacher' plays a significant role in the process of Roma education. She is familiarised with Roma culture and language and for 10 years has participated in Roma community life with voluntary help. She also completed the training for teachers supporting Roma pupils' education organised by the Ministry of the Interior and Administration. Her duties comprise of various things. She arranges financial support for the Roma families, helps to handle administrative matters, supervises the children's educational progress, teaches compensatory lessons, helps with the homework, and remains in constant touch with the families. She also helps other teachers in the school to understand cultural conditions influencing the educational process for Roma children.

Other important members of the team are the Roma assistants. They represent the local Roma community and account for the guarantee of good treatment of the Roma pupils by Polish pupils and teachers at the school. They control the pupils' attendance and educational progress, ensure emotional support for the pupils, and help them to understand teacher expectations and demands. They also help teachers to identify and solve problems of particular pupils and mediate in conflict situations. The Roma assistants build good connections between the parents and the school and strengthen the positive image of the school and the advantages that come from being educated.

### *Promoting mutual understanding*

An important objective of the programme is to create various opportunities for connecting Polish and Roma culture. It refers not only to pupils in the school but also to their families and society as a whole. There are celebrations of such events as Roma Culture Day, International Roma Day, and Roma Family Day with Roma dances and songs performed by Roma artists. These meetings gather many Roma and Polish people, break psychological barriers and facilitate mutual understanding. They give a chance for Polish people to change their attitudes towards Roma culture, to enrich their perception and knowledge in this field. At the same time, Roma people have an opportunity to experience the appreciation for their culture, which makes them feel more secure and accepted within the school community. Little by little, rejection and distrust towards the non-Roma world is replaced by engagement in the school life and educational process.

### *Conclusions*

One year after its introduction, the programme for the development of Roma children appeared to be succeeding. The truancy of Roma pupils decreased significantly and there were also educational achievements observed, i.e. several Roma pupils were classified to the final group of the all-Polish scholarship contest for the most skilled children. It can be regarded as a confirmation that the programme is properly adjusted to particular needs and abilities of Roma children. It is well perceived by the teachers and the Roma parents and pupils also seem to have positive feelings concerning education in this particular school.

### ***One World Association***

The 'One World Association' is a non-profit organization with the mission of promoting peace and mutual understanding by means of international and national voluntary programmes and education. The Association was established in 1992 and from the very beginning has been acting as a part of the international organization Service Civil International (SCI). It undertakes many actions aimed at raising social awareness in people, developing more open and tolerant attitudes towards others, and promoting international cooperation and harmonious coexistence of people from different cultures and religions.

### *Multicultural Dimension of Education*

Among the various activities undertaken by the One World Association is a programme called 'The Different - The Equal', which provides strong educational values in teacher professional development. It has been run since 1996 by volunteers of the Association, and is now carried out with the support of the UNHCR Warsaw Office, the Central Department for Teacher Training, the Department of Education of the city of Poznan, many organisations representing minority groups, as well as individual refugees and representatives of minority groups.

The Programme covers:

- lessons at schools conducted with active teaching methods e.g.: simulation, brainstorming, working in groups, discussions, work with photos, articles etc.,
- workshops and seminars for teachers and volunteers, concerning refugees, ethnic and national minorities, as well as tolerance and openness for widely comprehended diversities ('How to teach about human rights?', 'How to teach about refugees?' and 'How to teach about national and ethnic minorities?'),
- topic campaigns, street happenings, cultural events, artistic exhibitions and informative actions,
- elaboration and issuing of a variety of publications and educational materials such as handbooks, articles, reports from workshops with description of training methods, lesson scenarios, leaflets, minutes, posters and video tapes. They are available on the One World Association web site or in its offices. Most of them are both in Polish and English.

The educational activities are carried out by both volunteers and schoolteachers. The teachers are being prepared for these activities during workshops and seminars in order to develop their professional competences in a range of multicultural education. They can learn through participation in many events organised both in school and in public places, and with many educational materials issued by the Association.

The materials are connected with three main topics: '*Human rights issues*', '*Ethnic and national minorities*' and '*Refugees*'. Among them there are:

- A handbook for leaders of lessons on human rights issues (2002),
- A handbook for the training event 'How to teach about human rights issues?',
- A lesson scenario on ethnic and national minorities,
- A handbook for leaders of lessons on ethnic and national minorities (2004),
- An information brochure 'National Minorities in Poland' (2001) - this publication delivers useful information on 14 minority groups living in Poland,
- A publication 'Following national and religious minorities in east part of the Bialystok region' (2001),
- A report on the meeting of volunteers of Service Civil International and minority representatives placed in south-west Poland (2001),
- A videocassette 'Minorities in the eye of the camera' (2001). It presents ceremonies and places connected with minority tradition and religion,
- A handbook for the training event 'How to teach about refugees?'
- Supplementary material for leaders of lessons on refugees including lesson scenarios, pictures, and game proposals
- An information brochure 'Refugees'.

The most recent activities undertaken in the course of 'The Different - The Equal' programme are the projects 'In support of refugees' and 'Antidiscrimination every day', both implemented in the year 2005. The second activity was accomplished in cooperation with the Teacher Training Centre and five secondary schools in Poznań, financially supported by the EU Phare Programme and the Voivodeship Office in Poznan. The project was addressed to secondary school students, teachers and volunteers

who conducted workshops for students and supported them in implementing their own individual projects in the classrooms.

The main stages of the project were:

- Recruitment of pupils and teachers from all secondary schools in Poznań.
- Four-day workshops and seminars for teachers and volunteers on their own antidiscrimination projects. This training covered theoretical and practical aspects of stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination, social exclusion, racism, neofascism and neonazism. During the training, five groups were formed, to assign different kind of projects related to a theme of antidiscrimination. The educational, photographic, informational, sociological and theatrical projects were proposed.
- Workshops for students organised from February till April 2005. Each group of students took part in four workshops – two of them were devoted to antidiscrimination and stereotype issues and two others referred to the students' projects. The workshops were conducted by previously trained teachers and volunteers.
- Project implementation - From March till April 2005, pupils' projects were realised with the support of volunteers and teachers. Five groups of students prepared different projects in regard to antidiscrimination. *Educational group* created and ran two educational workshops for other pupils. The first workshop was about national stereotypes and the second one about gender stereotypes. *Photographical group* made a photograph exhibition referring to antidiscrimination. Pupils from this group took many photos presenting diversity in a variety of ways and then choose the best ones for the final exhibition. *Informational group* made a leaflet and five posters about antidiscrimination. Posters were hung in schools and universities, inviting everybody to the exhibition. *Sociological group* made a survey about discrimination in Poznań. They conducted research in five schools, then analysed the results and presented their findings. *Theatrical group* made a play about antidiscrimination called 'Hello?!' for pupils from other schools. After its completion a communal discussion was arranged.
- Final exhibition – On the 15th of June 2005 the opening ceremony of the 'Antidiscrimination every day' exhibition took place in the Culture Centre 'Castle' in Poznan. It gathered over 100 people – students, teachers and head-teachers from Poznan schools, nongovernmental organisation and others. The ceremony was followed by the press conference.
- Evaluation – On the 26th of June a follow up seminar meeting took place. During the meeting, recommendations about the realisation of similar projects by others were suggested.
- Publication – the handbook about the project was issued. It describes with detail each stage of the project, shows results, and presents workshops scenarios and other helpful information for people interested in realising similar projects in the future. This publication is available in the One World Association office free of charge.

### **Conclusions**

The One World Association activities address areas underdeveloped both in the secondary school curriculum and the teacher education curriculum. There are not many initiatives in Poland so strongly focused on the development of an open society through promoting understanding and tolerance between people from different countries, nationalities, cultures and religions. It is made by intensive educational activity to promote multicultural communication and break down barriers and prejudices. In our view, the Association actions and programmes can be perceived as valuable element of pupil and teacher education, and its activities should be more generally employed in teacher education.

### Concluding remarks

Since the fall of communism a new approach to multicultural education has been developing in the Polish educational system. Many initiatives are being undertaken aiming at involving minority groups in a full participation in social life and at overcoming the psychological barriers, prejudices, and negative attitudes to diversities existing in Polish society. These activities realised both by state and private institutions give many advantages to minorities, teachers, and society as a whole, tackling multicultural issues at schools and preparing their students for coexistence, tolerance and acceptance of "the other". This is an opportunity for Polish teachers to gain professional, intercultural competence and to include these elements into their teaching curricula.

Although there is an increasing number of such initiatives there is a big gap between teachers' needs and educational support within the Polish educational system. It is strongly recommended that issues discussed in the course of initial teacher training are include, to give teachers inspiration for professional development in the field of multicultural education. In the Polish democratic transformation multicultural education becomes an important social instrument supporting equal opportunities, open communication and democratic relations at schools and in society as a whole.

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