

## TEACHERS' INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AND TEACHER EDUCATION – A CASE OF POLAND

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### Abstract:

While speaking of getting the young generation ready for active participation in a global society, the competence of teachers and their activities cannot be passed over. The intercultural competent teacher is able to understand, evaluate and relate to ambiguous and uncertain intercultural situations, realizing the relative validity of the own frame of reference and able to select and use communication styles and behavior that fit a specific local and intercultural context. The level of intercultural competence of teachers, their activity or passivity in the broadly understood area of culture, have an undeniable impact on students' attitudes towards multicultural issues. Equipping teacher candidates with essential intercultural competence during the period of university studies is a precondition of rising to constantly changing new challenges of the contemporary world. In the article the realities and opportunities of forming the intercultural competence of Polish teachers are being discussed. Polish teachers and teacher candidates may acquire skills and competences necessary for satisfactory functioning in a multicultural society through university programs or in-service trainings organized mostly by NGOs.

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**Key Words:** Intercultural competence, teacher education in Poland, teachers' competence

### Introduction:

Poland is a country which is relatively homogeneous ethnically, but there are exceptions from this rule when referring to the biggest Polish cities (Warsaw, Cracow, Wroclaw, Lodz). Poland has a population of 38 512 thousand people (2011) and 93.88 percent of inhabitants reported only Polish nationality. Nationality only non-Polish was cited by 1.46 percent of respondents what gives the number of 562 thousand. People who declared non-Polish or double nationality are mostly representatives of national and ethnic minorities as well as foreigners.

Compared to many other countries, the number of immigrants in Poland is still relatively low. However, diversity cannot be seen as a phenomenon in Polish society because Poland has always had its ethnic and linguistic minorities, such as Kaszubi and Lemkowie.

Globalization is the given that requires both students and teachers to develop the key competences for lifelong learning. Furthermore, internationalization of higher education in Europe has become an established reality. The concept of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) seems to be the evidence of the realization of the idea of a multilingual and multicultural Europe. How and to what extent do the teacher education centres in Poland contribute to or hinder a learning environment that stimulates intercultural competence of teachers? Are teacher training curricula in Poland designed in such a way that they enhance a learning environment that deliver graduates to function in terms of cultural and linguistic dimensions? The answer to these questions is still not clear. The ongoing process of introducing European (EQF) and National Qualifications Framework (NQF) for higher education in Poland has brought many formal questions. In the first part of the article I describe the theoretical perspective for the intercultural competence of teachers. Then the key issues connected with teacher education in Poland are presented.

### Teachers' intercultural competence and a case of Poland – main aspects:

What does globalization imply for the expected learning outcomes of the university curricula where teachers are trained? Developing social competence in all students, also candidates for teachers, is crucial. B. Majerek (2012) pointed out that tolerance of uncertainty should be considered as an

important dimension of social competence. Definitions on culture relate to a mostly invisible template for rules of engagement in a group. The template organizes and gives meaning to our daily functioning, to our every day choices and challenges. An individual is able to predict behaviour of others therefore predictions may reduce uncertainty and anxiety. On the other hand only when confronted with different or unexpected responses we may become aware of our own specific value orientation.

Nowadays every new teacher entering the profession should be provided with tools that create a deeper understanding of one's own personal motivation, a deep reflection about her/his own personal, social and intercultural competences, her/his own value and belief system. These aspects, especially dealing with the issues like attitudes, behaviour, value clarity and respect are competences that lie far beyond the knowledge of the taught subjects. (TICKLE, The Final Report, 2009 p. 11).

Teachers' intercultural learning and its result, intercultural competence can be seen as conditions and goals for increasing cultural awareness, understanding and learning from others. Multicultural and intercultural interactions are opportunities to start the dialogue but also to become emphatic.

Nowadays, in nearly every country of Europe, multiculturalism is the rule than the exception at schools or classrooms. For teachers, such multicultural dimension is a big challenge. In a number of the countries different legislative and special provisions have been installed to meet the students' needs, both with respect to the students cultural background and the teachers capability to handle the unknown situations and teaching processes. Without even raising awareness of cultural, linguistic and social differences, teaching is left undone (TICKLE. The Final Report, 2009, p. 41).

Teachers' intercultural competence is a developmental process of formal and informal learning.

For Polish teacher training centres one of the main objectives which are perspective ones should be to discuss and implement the examples of best educational practices that are supportive of the development of teachers' intercultural competence. Both teacher trainers and trainees need to respond to an increasing variety of cultural different needs and expectations. Creation of such a dimension that works for all constituents stimulates cross-cultural learning but demands high levels of intercultural competence.

### **Intercultural competence**

Intercultural competence refers to behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately in cross-cultural situations and in this context will be based on teachers' intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes. Deardorff (2004) describes intercultural competence as a process in which attitudes like respect for different cultures and values, openness and curiosity lead to cultural self-awareness, emphatic understanding of other cultures, and the ability and willingness to behave accordingly. It is a developmental process which was used by Bennett (1993, 2004) to formulate a model in which one can progress from ethnocentric to ethnorelative world views. The developmental model of intercultural sensitivity was adapted by Hammer (2008) and explains the differences between five consecutive stages of intercultural awareness and competence. The final stage in this model is adaptation. Cultural self-awareness and the in depth understanding of value differences is crucial because leads to effective changes in one's behaviour and communication style.

### **Intercultural competence in teacher education**

In a number of European documents the importance of the issues concerning the competence and qualifications of teachers in the field of intercultural education are mentioned (i.e. Declaration "Intercultural Education in the New European Context" of the Council of Europe). In terms of the theory the intercultural trainings of teachers should include the theoretical concepts regarding intercultural competence, culture, cultural differences and commonalities and their effects on communication processes.

In Poland the formal system of supporting teachers in the field of intercultural competence does not exist nationwide. However, in the nearest future it may be one of the most important challenges for the Polish educational policy at every school level. Many teachers admit that the issues related to multiculturalism are missed in formal teacher education at the universities. For example, in

the academic year of 2012/13 at the Pedagogical University of Cracow, which is the oldest and best known pedagogical university in Poland, there are only few obligatory courses connected more or less with intercultural issues (European Education, Comparative Education, Human Rights). There is only one course entitled Multiculturalism and Migrations but is optional to take and it is organised for the first time.

Nowadays, Polish higher institutions have to adopt to the educational requirements of the Bologna process. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) for higher education is characterized by the fact that descriptions are formulated in the language of learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are described in terms of knowledge, skills and personal and social competence. There are at least few difficulties Polish universities can experience when developing curricula for the category of personal and social competence, namely:

- How to understand, interpret the term "personal and social competence" in accordance with the guidelines of the frameworks (both EQF and NQF);
- What activities are crucial to include in the teaching process to build the student's expected results (what elements of the programme will be used in the construction of this particular set of competencies);
- How to check whether the intended learning outcomes have been achieved.

In July 2010, NQF Steering Committee in Poland, having considered the proposals of experts, adopted the definition of "third column" of EQF to distinguish between knowledge, skills and competences. The following understanding has been proposed: these are the personal and social skills, or the ability for autonomous and responsible action, the ability to interact with others as both a member and leader of the group, as well as the ability to adapt to the ever faster changing world through learning throughout life (The Autonomy of University Curriculum, 2011).

The characteristics of the learning outcomes for the eight separate areas of education for NQF in Poland are given descriptions of the requirements for personal and social competence. These descriptions vary due to the nature of learning (i.e. requirements for humanities and social sciences). The requirements for personal and social competence does not describe or define specific actions to be taken by universities in Poland. Entering NQF in Polish higher institutions thus involves various dilemmas and dispute. In the initial phase it will probably not lead to the effective process of equipping students with intercultural competences (Pająk-Ważna, 2011).

Outside the universities the issues of multiculturalism scrolls in a variety of forms. One of the leading project to mention is that of the Foundation Diversity Forum. The project is called "Promoting multicultural schools: the development and implementation of tools to support teachers in schools receiving refugees." The aim of the project is to increase the intercultural competence of teachers working with refugee children. The project is scheduled to instruct a group of about 60 teachers working in multicultural schools in Poland.

The research conducted in 2009 in teacher training colleges around the country shows that the scope of training on the education and integration of foreign pupils and intercultural skills training proposed by these institutions is still insufficient. Training on multiculturalism, stereotypes or prejudices were conducted in only seven of the fifty-six centres for teachers (Pająk-Ważna, 2011).

In 2010, the Centre for the Development of Education (ORE), headquartered in Warsaw, started the project "Education towards the challenges of migration." The overall objective of the project is to support Polish educational institutions in the field of intercultural education. The centre undertook the task of preparing the selected experts to act as provincial coordinators.

There are also initiatives associated with the publishing activity of different bodies. For example, "Intercultural Education", is a yearbook edited by the Department of General Education, Institute of Education Sciences of the Faculty of Ethnology and Sciences of Education, University of Silesia. It is a pedagogical magazine, dedicated to education and cross-cultural issues in Poland and worldwide.

The idea of publishing the journal of "Intercultural Education" is conditioned by gradually progressive crystallization of intercultural education, which is one of the most important new sub-disciplines of modern education in the world, and in the last two decades, a rapidly developing in Poland. Significant impulses for its development have become the process of European integration and the activity of Polish scientists. It refers to the tradition of the series "Intercultural Education",

which appeared in Cieszyn research centre since 1992 and currently includes 48 volumes. Issues included in both the series and in the yearbook are presented in the readings of appropriate pedagogy, psychology, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, theology, anthropology, history (and other disciplines of the humanities broadly conceived). The category "borderline" treated was (and still is) in Bakhtin's terms - as the border between cultures, communities, religions (and not primarily - though also - borderline states and nations). Research and studies for methodological reflection are accompanied by attempts to improve the methodology of the study and how to interpret the test results. The journal provides a forum research, favoring the development and dissemination of educational sciences intercultural education, thus allowing multi-specialty teaching representatives and representatives of other disciplines - to share their achievements and to establish extensive cooperation and exchange of experience.

### **Conclusion:**

Intercultural aspects in teacher training in general should not be something marginal or exceptional.

The modern teachers must reflect on their own teaching practice in order to be able to answer key questions about how to interpret the concept of culture, what topics should be undertaken within the framework of intercultural education, what goals would be achieved. In particular the targets of the intercultural competence trainings for teachers should be:

- To acquaint teachers with innovative approaches at school and in society where, due to migration processes, societal pluralism is required,
- To enable teachers to be the bearers of school development process which guarantee the rights of a child education regardless of its linguistic, social and national background,
- To initiate multi-perspectivity when planning lessons for pupils,
- To allow teachers to gather experience.

A well-developed intercultural competence is always many-faceted, culturally and socially as well. It comprises an ability to cooperate across many boundaries, both the real and imagined. What seems inherently logic and rational to Polish teachers might not easily be understood by pupils of other cultures. It is needed and helpful to emphasize aspects of a specific culture. Mismatches may lead to many misunderstandings and as a consequence to stress and cultural fatigue. It might not be possible to prevent every cultural fatigue. However it is important for teachers to share different experiences in order to develop a continuous alertness.

Teacher training centers in Poland one way or the other have adopted a cultural dimension and international perspective in their curricula, responding to the global interdependencies of the contemporary world. Generally, during the teachers initial training, the students are not familiarizing with issues referring to multicultural education so teachers' intercultural competence is rather very poor. They usually have neither knowledge nor experience concerning teaching in multicultural environment and also have very limited information on national minorities living in Poland (Case Studies of Good Practice in Poland, 2006). Developing intercultural competence is one of the learning goals that should be mentioned by all universities. Both schools and teacher training institutions need to be organized in such a way that it enhances an inclusive learning environment in and outside the classroom allowing for positive intercultural dialogue and learning. It is also worth noting that "in a multicultural institution the traditional pattern of basic assumptions has changed in order to include different perspectives and handle diversity, creating an organizational culture of shared perceptions of practices and enhancing intercultural learning" (Gregersen-Hermans J., 2010, p. 3). Awareness of how culture influences the functioning of the schools in Poland and in what way cultural differences have an impact on the communication between teachers and students may be the first steps to create a stimulating environment which is necessary to gain intercultural competence.

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