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## From regional to intercultural education in Polish kindergartens

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## **From Regional to Intercultural Education in Polish Kindergartens**

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### **Introduction**

Multiculturalism in Poland has become a reality and, as a social phenomenon, it requires taking the appropriate educational actions which aim to support the processes of rooting people in the native culture, helping them surpass their direct experience and notice others with their history and differences, making them aware of the peculiarity of distinctness, and shaping a sense of common heritage. These objectives are fulfilled through the means of regional and intercultural education, starting as early as in kindergarten. Within the last decades, education has undergone certain important changes which have been recorded in the national curricula. These curricula determine the direction of changes in the practical work of teachers and children in kindergartens.

By analyzing the curricula, as well as selected kindergarten education programmes, one may conclude that intercultural education is rooted in regional education. The objective of this article is to indicate what theoretical and practical changes have taken place in Poland within the last few years in order to introduce kindergarten children into the world of culture, as well as to evaluate those changes from the point of view of a practising teacher on the basis of the comparison between the records in the national kindergarten curricula and in selected programmes.

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### **The assumptions of intercultural education in kindergartens**

Intercultural education can be understood as “all the mutual influences and interactions between units and groups, institutions, organizations, associations and relations that facilitate such development of a human being during which the person becomes a fully aware and creative member of a family, local, regional, religious, national, continental, cultural and global or earthly community, who is able to actively fulfil his or her own, unique and constantly created, identity” (Nikitorowicz, 2007, p. 45).

A human being living in a multicultural society is able to make contact with the representatives of other groups. The objective of intercultural education is to shape such attitudes that will make it possible for a person to make contact and to communicate with others in order to learn about them and understand them without the need to dominate them or yielding to prejudice and fear. The coexistence of different social and cultural groups should be based on tolerance, integration and acceptance of a man as a person, but also on respect for their nationality and tradition. Tolerance may be achieved through intercultural dialogue, the objective of which is to protect people against globalization, homogenization, but also against ethnocentrism and ethnonationalism (Nikitorowicz, 2005, p. 30).

K. Kamińska (2007, p. 79) points to two ways of intercultural education consisting in the transfer of knowledge (from knowing to understanding the new culture) and maintaining relations between human beings in which, apart from the knowledge of certain aspects of cultural distinctness, the ability to communicate is an important factor.

A well-shaped picture of themselves and their group, as well as being rooted in their culture, helps people to notice the Others and their distinctness, but also certain similarities and relationships. Shaping one's own identity is important because “a man cannot create the image of himself, the concept of himself, or identify with someone, if he has not found any group of reference, i.e. people important for him or his cultural heritage” (Kamińska, 2007, p. 79).

According to J. Nikitorowicz, the idea of intercultural education should shape the awareness of human solidarity through:

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- “knowing and understanding oneself, one’s own culture, world, roots and homeland;
  - overcoming the tendency to close oneself within the area of one’s own values and cultural sphere in order to be open to and to understand others, respect their differences and treat them as a development factor;
  - encouraging to notice and learn about the Other, shaping the sensitivity and the ability to cooperate with others, as well as protecting people against a simplified and deformed image of the Other;
  - encouraging the exchange of experiences within the scope of the fulfilment of educational programmes as well as social and institutional activity” (Nikitorowicz, 2007, p. 48).

Since intercultural education is related to the concept of culture, it is important for a human being to be aware of the existence of equal cultures that are developing as a result of the transfer of values.

Within the scope of intercultural education, the following tendencies should be promoted:

- acculturation related to the concept of mutual borrowings of a voluntary nature,
- integration, the promotion of tolerance and mutual respect through constant dialogue, while respecting and maintaining native values,
- democracy, the promotion of humanism, freedom and responsibility (Nikitorowicz, 2009, p. 180 and 188).

Multiculturalism challenges modern education as a means of preparing a human being for living in the cultural and worldview diversity without resorting to violence against others, dominating others or giving up one’s cultural identity in the name of misinterpreted tolerance. An important element of such an education is acquiring the ability to understand oneself and others, to negotiate, talk and cooperate with others

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despite the cultural differences. In kindergarten education, this is fulfilled within the scope of educational areas aimed at shaping children's social skills, their ability to communicate with adults and children, proper behaviour during play and task situations, as well as family, civil and patriotic education.

At the stage of kindergarten education, cultural distinctness should be presented as a novelty. Novelty does not mean strangeness, which may make a child anxious, but it should make the child interested in what is different. J. Kamińska points out that the child's first contact with cultural distinctness should be based on objects – "cultural artefacts" – and only later on the contact with adults. She emphasizes that novelty stimulates the child's cognitive curiosity, so it encourages the young learner to be active, to introduce a new element into fun. What is important is the fact that objects, certain cultural products, do not weaken a child's sense of security. That is why we should start from establishing the relationship between the child and the object, as a result of which the child's interest shall lead to knowledge and understanding.

The first contact with cultural distinctness may be related to the presence of a child whose origins are different in the kindergarten group. In this case, the teacher's role is to support the adaptation and integration processes within the whole group.

An important element that makes one culture different from other cultures is language which, in direct communication, may make the child afraid of accepting and understanding cultural distinctness (Kamińska, 2005, p. 22–23). In kindergarten education, apart from learning speech (broadening the vocabulary, understanding and proper usage of speech) and acquiring the ability to communicate in the native language (the mother tongue), children are increasingly often given the opportunity to learn foreign languages. The oldest children attend obligatory English classes, which also facilitates their school education. There are specialized kindergartens in which a selected foreign language is obligatory. Kindergarten children's speech is in the process of developing, so their contact with another language is an important element not only of intercultural education, but also of the modern approach to education in general.

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### **The direction of change in the regional and intercultural kindergarten education**

The objective of the reforms introduced into Polish education is the modernization of the education process, which results from sudden changes in the field of society and culture, politics or economics, as well as from the need to prepare young people for living in changed circumstances. A. Gajdzica (2006, p. 265–266) notices that the reform should not only be focused on the present, and on adjusting curricula to the current problems, but it should also take into account the future, including forecasting social changes a young person shall face in his or her adult life. At the moment, the leading problem is society's multiculturalism which, until now, in certain regions of Poland, has not played an important role and therefore has not been a challenge for practising teachers. This is confirmed by the research carried out by K. Kamińska (2007, p. 282, 294) between 2002–2005 among kindergarten teachers who, despite possessing a friendly attitude towards multiculturalism, admitted that they knew nothing (34% of the total) or little on this issue (56% of the total). Furthermore, the research showed that the teachers were unprepared to carry out intercultural classes in kindergarten. However, it should be noted that certain elements of regional education did occur in kindergarten educational programmes, although the awareness of the need to shape children's cultural identity and to open them to cultural distinctness was and still is low among those teachers who have no everyday contact with multiculturalism. Therefore, we want to show the current direction of the development of the regional and intercultural kindergarten education, as well as the changes that may be noticed in the programmes that are commonly available for the teachers.

On the basis of the above mentioned theoretical assumptions of regional and intercultural education, and taking into account the books on this issue, one may distinguish the different stages that shape a child's cultural identity. The first stage includes learning about oneself, looking for an answer to the question: who am I? At this stage the child is given a series of exercises that help them to shape their own image, including

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experiencing oneself, learning about one's own appearance, one's strong points, interests and acquired abilities. This reinforces the child's self-confidence, and shapes their sense of respect and dignity. An important element of this stage is learning non-verbal and verbal communication, describing one's feelings, desires and needs, as well as understanding oneself and others. The construction of the child's identity continues in kindergarten, through contact with a larger social group, in the process of socialization. The child may experience their competence in a group, notice their own appearance, features and personality traits, as well as notice all the differences and similarities. Being in a group of peers, the child gradually acquires an awareness of belonging to various social groups (Surma, 2010, p. 28). Another stage of intercultural education is learning about one's family and giving meaning to the family values and culture. The child creates their identity within the context of intergenerational relationships. Learning about their own region, the child becomes open to noticing another culture and experiencing the cultural differences in the local society.

The stages of regional and intercultural education described by J. Nikitorowicz correspond, to a certain degree, with the objectives and contents included in kindergarten education programmes based on the national curriculum of 1999. That curriculum was divided into four areas:

1. Knowing and understanding oneself and the world.
2. Acquiring skills through action.
3. Finding one's place in a group of peers, in the community.
4. Building a system of values.

Within these areas, a kindergarten teacher could accomplish the assumptions of intercultural education by making the children learn about themselves through different actions against the context of a group of peers and family, as well as the closest geographical, environmental, social and cultural settings. Moreover, the child was introduced into the system of values, principles, norms and social rules in order to acquire the ability to live in a group of people. An example of a programme based

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on the national curriculum of 1999 is “ABC... The Kindergarten Education Program of 21st Century”, in which regional education was carried out within the area of social and moral aspects, science, culture and aesthetic, technology, as well as speech and thought (Łada-Grodzicka, 2010). Special attention should be paid to the programme’s contents that are related to the social and moral education.

However, in the programme’s theoretical assumptions we will not find any reference to the need for regional or intercultural education in the context of multiculturalism, although the contents include certain allusions to it. The authors focused on learning about the nearest setting, region and homeland, including the national symbols. As for the issues concerning the Earth as a planet, the authors address these to the oldest children, referring to their interest in prehistory, the universe and aspects of environmental protection. Furthermore, the authors introduce topics related to learning about the customs of other people, understanding the differences between people of all over the world (the colour of skin, customs, culture, folklore and the languages people speak), and noticing similarities between the inhabitants of the world. However, one may have the impression that these issues are presented in a theoretical (abstract) manner. What is missing here is the reference to the child’s direct experience with another culture or customs, and the opportunity to meet a peer of different origin in the kindergarten group. Also, there are no explicit references to the theoretical assumptions of regional and intercultural education and to the need of introducing the child into the world of multiculturalism. The research carried out by J. Kamińska reflects this situation in practice. The teachers, using the programmes certified by the Polish Ministry of Education (MEN), were not aware of the fact that they fulfilled the objectives and contents that were strictly related to the regional and intercultural education.

The programme in question was focused on creating the child’s identity against the context of the family and the group of peers, as well as knowing the nearest setting, region, and homeland, but there were no references to Europe, except for one, which may result from Poland’s political situation at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When Poland joined the



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European Union, not only the political, but also the social and cultural situations changed. At the moment, children have more and more opportunities to experience directly another culture and language. Due to the presence of peers of foreign origin in kindergartens, children integrate with them in a natural way, accepting cultural distinctness as something new and interesting. They are no longer surprised at the fact that there are people who speak a different language, look different, wear different clothes and play in a different way. The presence of foreign peers makes children curious and willing to learn rather than afraid of what is unknown. However, these changes require a different approach from teachers to education. The new reform of the education system, along with the new national curriculum of kindergarten education, which has been in force since 2008, should be of help in this regard.

What changes, therefore, have been introduced into the new national curriculum within the scope of regional and intercultural education? First of all, in the curriculum that is now obligatory, ten objectives of kindergarten education were formulated. These objectives are detailed in fifteen educational areas. These objectives are related to a child's multifaceted progress, including the child's intellectual, social, moral, physical, health, and psychological development. Among these ten objectives there are two that indicate the fulfilment of the assumptions of regional and intercultural education. The first of these refers to this type of education in an implicit manner, as it is focused on building the child's knowledge of the world of society, science and technology, and on developing the ability to express the child's thoughts in a way that is understandable to others. The other objective is focused on regional education in a more explicit manner, as it refers to shaping children's social sense of belonging (to the family, to the group of peers and to the national community) and a patriotic attitude. That objective corresponds to the last educational area in which family, civil and patriotic education is carried out.

Comparing the national kindergarten curricula of 1999 and 2008, one may conclude that the new curriculum takes into account the need of adjusting the educational process to the process of the child's development and preparation for living in society. The objectives and skills of

the kindergarten graduate were specified clearly in this area. Therefore, in their work, kindergarten teachers must take into account regional education focused on reinforcing the child's relations with the family and encouraging the child's interest in the region and hometown, as well as intercultural education that begins from shaping the sense of national identity. Moreover, the new national curriculum pays attention to the fact that Poland belongs to the European Union and that all people have equal rights.

The changes introduced in the national curriculum are reflected in kindergarten education programmes. The programme entitled "Before I Become a Student" is an example of such a kindergarten programme (Tokarska, Kopała, 2009). The authors pay attention to the children's need to gain "experience related to the knowledge of their family's history, of their hometown and then of the whole Poland: Polish legends, traditions, customs and the beauty of the landscape" (Tokarska, Kopała, 2009, p. 133). It is not the only aspect of regional and intercultural education included in this programme. The authors pay special attention to knowing the native language and reinforcing family relations that exert a significant influence on the development of the child's personality and the creation of his or her identity. Among family members the child comes to understand different social roles, becomes acquainted with values, and learns how to be independent and responsible. Kindergarten reinforces those bonds by creating a native culture, teaching family and national traditions, celebrating festivals, and teaching the meaning of symbols related to native culture.

In their theoretical assumptions, the authors of the "Before I Become a Student" programme include regional education, which is understood as teaching about the country's natural, social and cultural reality. They believe that the purpose of regional education is to develop the child's natural sensitivity, to help to shape the attachment to the child's own family, and to acquaint the child with the region's history and traditions through direct contact with the products of local culture and art.

A new direction, which is clearly emphasized in the national curriculum and in the programme in question, is building of national identity,

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as well as shaping the attitudes and patterns of behaviour related to national symbols, such as Poland's emblem, national anthem and flag. While the objectives of the old programmes included knowing and understanding the symbols, the new programmes focus on shaping the children's attitudes.

Another change includes the fact that the new programmes focus on making children aware of the fact that "we are not alone in the world and that among us there are people of different nationalities, cultures and religions" (Tokarska, Kopała, 2009, p. 133). Noticing cultural differences should help to build peaceful relations and attitudes facilitating partnership, tolerance and dialogue. The programme's contents also include information about the European Union and European countries, the purpose of which is to make children aware of Poland' role and significance in Europe, and to reinforce their sense of belonging to the European community. A kindergarten graduate must know that he or she is a Pole and that their homeland is Poland – a country that belongs to the European Union.

The changes in kindergarten education clearly oscillate between civil and patriotic education and the phenomenon of multiculturalism, which, based on democratic values, is to result in the mutual understanding and coexistence of people who are different in terms of social origin, political views, religion, language, sex, skin colour or race. The authors emphasize that modern kindergarten education takes into account the children's multiculturalism and that the teacher's role is to introduce the children to the meaning of different cultural or religious symbols. Special attention is paid to patriotic education, which is related to the shaping of a sense of responsibility – first for the hometown, region, and the country, and then for the whole world. This results from discovering that all the Earth's resources are the common good of the inhabitants of a region, country, Europe and the world.

Not only is regional education related to knowing the homeland as a natural environment, but it also serves as an introduction to the world of culture, customs, traditions, norms, manners, history, literature and music.

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## Conclusion

Because of society's multiculturalism, education must solve problems related to people's cultural identity, communication, dialogue, subjectivity, tolerance, acceptance, esteem, respect, dignity and coexistence. In Polish kindergartens, regional education has always been present, but it did not take into account the phenomenon of multiculturalism and interculturalism, which, in the latest changes to the national curriculum, has been slightly emphasized.

J. Nikitorowicz (2009, p. 15 and 117) points out that "culture, being a differentiating factor, also becomes the base for unifying agreement". That is why, educational activity should be focused on "experiencing and understanding the reality, making social changes, and attempting to understand oneself and others".

The essence of regional and intercultural education is to make the person who is involved in the issues important for the setting, not only through the acceptance of values and rules, but also through transforming them in accordance with common ideals (Muszyńska, 2005, p. 115). The knowledge of rules and regulations, as well as an awareness of one's own cultural values, may not only be the starting point for coexistence and cooperation of units in solving everyday problems, but also in transforming and improving the existing reality. Education helps to shape such attitudes that correspond to the person's own culture, but without separation, assimilation or marginalization. Paying attention to raising the value of one's own culture, religion and language, is to protect the young person against globalization. However, at a time of pluralism and democracy, teaching tolerance and dialogue is also necessary.

The national kindergarten curriculum of December 2008 details the objectives of a child who has completed kindergarten, areas of knowledge and skills falling within the scope of regional and intercultural education. In particular, these changes refer to family, civil and patriotic education, which takes into account the need to create a cultural identity based on studying and discovering native values, language, religion and traditions. Kindergarten children are curious of the world and new things.

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It is a good stage of a person's life for shaping such attitudes towards the Other that are devoid of prejudice, stereotypes and the willingness to dominate others. However, will these changes be actually noticed by practising teachers and will they be appropriately introduced in all Polish kindergartens?

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**Abstract:**

Multiculturalism as a social phenomenon requires from education to solve some issues concerning cultural identity shaping, education into dialogue which supports subjectivity, tolerance, acceptance, dignity and recognition. Culture is to help a child to understand himself, to create his own identity, as well as to be able to participate in the creation of modern civilization and to become oriented in the surrounding reality. Fast technological changes as well as easy access to information make it possible to penetrate and to get knowledge about different cultures. The goal of education is to shape in a child the abilities to interpret reality, to see cultural similarities and differences and to be able to make good evaluation.

In order to understand multiculturalism and to educate into peaceful coexistence of different cultures, one first needs to help a child to get to know and to appreciate his own culture. It can be done by introducing a child to regional education. Striking roots into one's own culture, without tendency to be closed in only one culture, can be of help in understanding other people and in overcoming the stereotypes concerning the fear of accepting cultural differences. The next step towards multicultural dialogue is intercultural education. Drawing attention to the need of studying foreign languages by kindergarten children allows initiating intercultural dialogue. Regional and intercultural education in kindergarten open children to the world and satisfy their cognitive interests.

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