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Multicultural, inclusive, holistic - internal relationships and tensions in early education practices¹

**Multikulturowa, inkluzywna, holistyczna - wewnętrzne związki
i napięcia w praktykach wczesnej edukacji**

Abstract: The article presents the existing relationships between multicultural, inclusive, and holistic approaches in early education and their close, although often non-obvious, internally complex connection with the general teaching model implemented at school. Ignoring the occurrence of these relationships may weaken the development support offered to students and build attitudes of intolerance.

Keywords: multiculturalism, inclusion, holism, teaching model, early education.

Introduction

The aim of the article is to show that the three often emphasized characteristics of good practices in early education, i.e. multiculturalism, inclusiveness, and holism, are expressions of a more general concept of education. This means that they are deeply rooted in the teaching model, and

¹ The initial inspiration for the article was the 3-year Erasmus+ project “Teaching for Holistic, Relational and Inclusive Early Childhood Education (THRIECE)”, in which I represented University of Gdansk (Poland) with Agnieszka Nowak-Łojewska. The project also involved Marino Institute of Education in Dublin and Trinity College Dublin (Ireland), Universidade da Porto (Portugal) (read more: O’Toole, Regan, Nowak-Łojewska 2019). Within the three project features of education (holism, relationality, inclusion) the motive of the multiculturalism, not expressed, but visible in the project, was manifested.

the issue of intercultural education turns out to be particularly critical for recognizing the internal network of their connections.

These three features of early education interact and in many spheres interpermeate. Depending on how they are realized, they mutually reinforce or weaken each other in school practices. I make multicultural education the focal point, as becoming increasingly important considering the necessity to prepare Polish education to function in a non-monocultural world. I situate the analysis in a perspective of the theory of teaching, which complements approaches from ethnopedagogy (Nikitorowicz, 2018) and the theory of moral education (Ogrodzka-Mazur, 2007). The use of the term multicultural education, and not intercultural education, is controversial (Korporowicz, 1997), especially in our geographical area (Hill, 2007). However, my choice is the result of the common in Polish schools (which does not mean desirable) ways of realizing education for a coexistence of different cultures, and it is these forms that I criticize.

Multiculturalism, inclusion, and holism as interrelated pedagogical phenomena

Multiculturalism and, related to it, the advanced dialogue phenomena of interculturality and transculturality (Lewowicki, 2001; Nikitorowicz and Guziuk-Tkacz, 2021) and issues of cultural awareness or identity changes in the encounter of cultures, etc. (Korporowicz, 1997; Melosik, 2007) are today the subject of reflection around the world, not only in a pedagogical perspective. The axiological foundation supporting the coexistence of cultures is similar to the one on which the idea of inclusion is built (Komorowska and Szkudlarek, 2015). Mutual respect, equality, and the right of all people, including the weaker ones, to participate, to meet their needs and aspirations, and above all, to recognize the potential and strengths of each human being – these combine intercultural and inclusive thinking. At the same time, debates about difference uncover accompanying theoretical differences (Szumski, 2019) and axiological tensions and dilemmas in practice and competencies (Janiszewska-Nieściortuk, 2012).

It is hard not to notice the deep unity of the message formulated by special educational needs specialists with the holistic approach. As they emphasize: „Inclusive education opposes reducing the goals of education to narrowly understood school achievements and cognitive development. It assumes the necessity to support a harmonious development of students, which includes not only academic achievements, but also socio-emotional

competencies and general psychosocial wellbeing” (Chrzanowska and Szumski, 2019, p. 9).

The idea of holism is nothing new in pedagogy. The integral development of a person was written about many years ago by Pestalozzi, Dewey, Montessori, Neill, and others. Bogusław Śliwerski (2020), locating holism in the methodological, theoretical, and ethical perspective of pedagogy, points to the excellent inspirations for holistic pedagogy also coming from the works of Polish classics of pedagogy. In the broadest perspective, holistic pedagogy has the status of a metatheory (Johnson, 2023; Śliwerski, 2020), indicating that traditionally understood subdisciplines of pedagogy may also use a holistic perspective.

In pedagogical options, drawing upon psychology, emphasis is put on taking into account all spheres of child development (sensual, physical-health, cognitive, social, emotional) and their interconnections. This approach was characteristic in the pedagogy of pragmatism, according to the assumption that a child “always reacts (...) with his whole being” (Śliwerski, 2007, p. 58). It is still the basis of many concepts of education and research on children.

Whereas in the sociological perspective, a holistic understanding of education focuses on the external connection of the development of a child, who is not an abstracted individual, but lives in socializing networks. In addition to taking into account the broader sociocultural context, the importance of the individual residing in the material environment of the school is emphasized. The category of „silent partners” of education is referred to, such as places and spaces in schools (architectural features, styles of arranging classrooms and corridors, playgrounds, canteens, etc.), significant objects (teaching aids, furniture, decorations, and symbols, etc.), as well as the technologies.

Researches on “silent partners” in schools and universities, including those providing teacher training, have been conducted in Finland, France, and the USA. They showed how the way of organizing and using school places, things, and technologies moderates students’ experiences in terms of their well-being and social justice (Itkonen and Dervin, 2017). The sociological perspective in the holistic approach to the child is gaining prominence today also in the global dimension. „The return to holistic education is associated with the necessity of saving the essence of the learning process, which is so necessary for human survival in the industrial, scientific, and technical civilization, and even more so in the post-industrial civilization” (Śliwerski, 2007, p. 97).

What is important for Polish pedagogy, is that none of these approaches to holistic education is related to the so-called curriculum content integration in Polish early childhood education, an infantile and irrational concept (Klus-Stańska, 2005; Klus-Stańska and Nowicka 2014). Deeply understood holistic education is rooted in a general hermeneutic attitude and constant openness to new interpretations in academic theory and practice. In research it is expressed most strongly in the mosaic approach, what means conducting research not *on* children, but *with* children (Clark and Moss, 2011), and in education, for example, in teachers' narrative documentation typical of Reggio Emilia and the „Stockholm project” (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013), or in children's building of their identity through *learning stories* (Carr and Lee, 2012).

Even this introductory overview of the three titular categories is enough for one to notice that multicultural, inclusive, and holistic approaches in education seem to cooperate and tend towards similar ways of thinking and acting. And in many cases this is indeed the case. On the other hand, as I will try to show, some strategies of teaching about different cultures can lead to the weakening of inclusive and holistic attitudes and, paradoxically, to the strengthening of cultural intolerance.

For this purpose, I will refer to three aspects of early multicultural education:

- the content (information) for children (*what do we teach?*)
- the teaching model we use (*how do we teach?*)
- the concept of child development we assume (*who - do we think - we are teaching?*).

Content about other cultures

Polish early education typically tends to present other cultures to children as exotic, completely different from the one they know. The concept of multiculturalism is narrowly defined, for example, as information about unusual dishes and strange houses, traditional costumes, unknown celebrations, exotic fairy tales, etc. These are important issues, but they are insufficient and can be misleading. They are important because they provide elements of information about other cultures, especially in their traditional version. After all, culture is „written” in texts, music, movement... Such information is also an inspiration for teachers for many activities (based on conversation with children, designing, making posters, painting, cooking simple food, dancing, etc.), which have developmental potential on their own.

However, this kind of showing other cultures is extremely fragmentary, selective, full of gaps, and consequently untrue and stereotypical. Fragmentation is often declared in the assumptions of early multicultural education. Many Polish kindergartens put on their websites exactly the same declaration:

“Providing knowledge about other cultures will be fragmentary and related to content close to children (...) e.g. on the occasion of festivals children will learn not only about their own national or regional traditions, but also about traditions typical for distant countries, they will listen to Polish fairy tales and legends as well as fairy tales and legends from the remote corners of the world, they will taste traditional Polish dishes and will also try some unknown food from other parts of the world.”

As I understand it, the world of Polish people and their cultural identity, learned and recognized by children from other cultures, could be represented by, for example, Easter eggs, pickled cucumbers and the legend about Wawel Dragon. This can hardly be called an accurate image of our culture.

One of the worst teaching methods is to compare the other cultures' folklore with our contemporary culture. Presenting the traditional life and the past of other cultures is undoubtedly interesting, but it should be compared with our folklore, our traditional life, and our past (thatched cottages, haystacks, etc.). It is historically and anthropologically fascinating and educationally valuable. But if we show an African boy standing by a hut or an Inuit in a fur jacket next to an igloo, and a European boy in trousers, a sports sweater and with a book in his hand, then we produce an anthropological lie. And there is a lot of this type of material for young students in Poland. As a result, children, for example, associate Africa exclusively with wild animals, the jungle, and life outside civilization. They do not realize that it is an economically and culturally deeply diverse continent. Acting in accordance with the worst traditions and the controversial spirit of the Polish core curriculum, in which children are denied the mental competences they have at their age, teachers present them extremely superficial, infantile, and stigmatizing content.

Topics based on exotic titbits are, as I said above, also misleading because they focus solely on cultural differences. Although multicultural education is nowadays defined with an emphasis on celebrating differences, limiting ourselves to them shapes our cognitive representations in a specific way. When the image of the Other consists only of what is different, the representation created on this basis makes foreignness real, alienates, and

supports categorization based on clear demarcation lines. Stiff categorization becomes a source of serious cognitive distortions (Lukianoff and Haidt, 2023, p. 225). Such risk is increased by - what Gordon Allport explains - preferential thinking (1954, p. 9), which means that the natural tendency of the mind to simplify the image of the social world causes - as he called it - the normality of prejudice (1954).

We reach completely different results when we expose to children that each culture is not only *different* but also *similar* to ours in many ways. Children then see the human attributes common to all cultures and understand that, for example, in different places of the world people build very different houses, but all people need shelter; in some countries, children play games and activities that are unknown to us, but all children like to play.

When the differences are strongly visible, the looking by children for similarities creates a shared space for better mutual understanding and blurs lines between categories. Although categories are necessary to understand the world, stereotypes are most often associated with easily recognizable features. The thicker the line a category is marked with, the faster it builds prejudices. This is a result results of the tendency typical for human beings to maximize similarities between objects within a category and at the same time to minimize them between designata from different classes, which can be counteracted by modifying the category (Falkowski, 1999). It is not about ignoring differences, but about being aware that difference is contextualized by similarities. Difference without the context of what is shared and what unites causes a feeling of alienation. Only the difference contextualized by similarity allows children to understand the world without prejudices.

Categories with flexible and permeable boundaries are a type of borderline meanings. It is easy to see an analogy to the cultural borderlands, about which Jerzy Nikitorowicz writes: „only the borderland gives a chance to understand others, their views, reasons and behaviours, acceptance, respect for otherness and diversity. Only the borderland does not allow for rejecting others or imposing one's own views and thought patterns on others” (1995, p. 16). There is also a strong reinforcement of this approach from the pedagogy of special needs education. According to Zenon Gajdzica, the borderline is just a category that helps us to understand the potential of inclusive education (2015). Thus, although exoticism is cognitively attractive and easily attracts children's attention, it can weaken inclusive attitudes, holistic orientation, and attitudes of openness to the unknown.

To reduce this risk, in the school systems of many countries, instead of a selective presentation of culture reduced to spectacular differentiation,

educational materials contains many short, expressive narratives about the everyday life of people in other cultures, about their families, homes, work, joys, and worries. It creates an open perspective of thinking about others. Photographic material is preferred in these materials, because a photograph is a documentary sign more „real” than an illustration (it does not tempt with the interpretation „once upon a time, far, far away”). Children see their peers when they - just like them - run, play, help their parents, etc. The storytelling builds the context of events, which helps reduce bias in perceiving Others, giving food for careful, analytical processing of data and breaking rigid patterns (Brycz, 2004).

Whereas, when children come to know the Other not through stories about the everyday lives of peers “like them”, but through a group symbols, that is (note the semantic differences here!) generalized, but at the same time non-holistic, or even non-holistic because it is generalized, then the Other is a misfired collage, a conglomerate of fragments, a haphazard mosaic of group features.

At the same time, it is important to create conditions for children to notice intracultural differences, also within close cultures, which are known to them. It is possible only if a culture is not presented as a monolith, but as an internally diverse structure. For example, when children - interview members of their family – find out what toys their grandparents had or how they had to behave at school (Garbula-Orzechowska, 2002), then these internal differences show them that difference does not make someone „alien” or „non-assimilable”. Unfortunately, the lack of everyday life history in the Polish core curriculum does not help to notice the importance of such issues for building their own identity by students and their openness to the identity of other social groups.

To summarize this subject matter, I can say that some multicultural education strategies are non-holistic, non-inclusive, and, paradoxically, anti-intercultural. The inclusive orientation is supported by looking for similarities in clearly different cultures and differences in similar cultures. And the storytelling form and everyday threads give children’s understanding of cultures a holistic perspective. Such educational nuances as the way questions are formulated, analogies used or examples indicated are of fundamental importance for understanding.

Teaching-learning model

The three titular attributes of early education turn out to be strongly related, not only to each other, but also to the teaching approach carried out at school. For example, Grzegorz Szumski emphasizes that inclusive education requires building a new type of school (2019, p. 24) and „abandoning traditional educational methods, especially the one-direction transfer of knowledge by teacher to the whole class by expository methods. This in turn opens up mental space in classrooms to make common the constructivist model of education. Particularly recommended are various variants of students' work in heterogeneous groups and pairs, including peer tutoring, as well as solutions that make the course of lessons more flexible” (2019, p. 22). Therefore, making an argument about the close connection between the method of teaching and the attitude to different cultures, I also mean education in areas that are distant in terms of subject matter from the content about cultures. In other words, openness to other cultures and broadly understood „otherness” is also related to learning, for example, the formula of a rectangle surface area and the states of matter and of water.

Here is how it happens. If only the conditions are towardly, in their education children have constant opportunities to observe that people think and act in different ways: they use different strategies when counting, they have different attitudes towards the characters in books, they formulate different arguments, etc. And it is just the socialization in a climate of diversity of thought and action that is crucial for multicultural education. It does not matter what area of learning this diversity concerns. It can be anything.

In Poland, we have very serious problems with this kind of socialization. And it is not the result of the lack of competences of teachers, i.e. something that can be supplemented and amended, but from the established model of teaching based on the leading role of the teacher, treated as the only right one (Klus-Stańska, 2018; Nowicka, 2010). The model emphasizes uniformity and collective thinking, with the result that, in this case, collectivity does not mean being together or cooperation, but mental unification, unity expressed in sameness.

The students' learning is conducted step by step by the teacher, according to a detailed scenario, which includes not only the teacher's questions and instructions, not only the tasks for the students, but also the strategies they are supposed to use, the answers they should give and the conclusions they ought to formulate. During the lesson, a collective note is written, and it is treated as binding. Whereas, as Zygmunt Bauman (1995) underlines,

the emphasis on order, aimed at eliminating ambiguity, creates intolerance despite declaring respect for differences.

In addition, the student's workshop is actually only a notebook and an exercise book. The students do not design, build, or experiment. Their activity is focused on words. They listen to what others listen to. They read and write what everyone else does. They say what another student would also say. Children are socialized in the belief that there is only one correct interpretation of every element of the world, and, what is more, this interpretation should be expressed by using appropriate words (so called proper answer).

What is more, since children speak, read, and write in Polish during lessons, we limit the possibility of immigrant children learning in our classes until they master our language. Meanwhile, from the experience of traditionally multicultural countries, we have long possibilities to take many guiding lights for activities based on peer cooperation and peer action, which enable foreign-language children to learn together with native children all the time (e.g. Klus-Stańska and Horton, 1994).

So, the teachers' attitudes towards children's independence, their personal reasoning, writing, counting, speaking or experimenting is closely linked to multicultural education. If we want children to be tolerant and open towards other cultures, we need provide education in which what is different, diverse, individual, is not perceived as incorrect, inadequate, or undesirable.

This relationship directs attention towards the concept of the child as a developing and learning subject adopted in school.

The concept of the child and his/her development

In relation to the three title attributes of education, it is easiest to see the connection between the conceptualization of the child and his development with the holistic approach. In the psychosocial sense, the child is a system that must not be reduced to the sum of its parts. This in itself means that children's attitude towards other cultures is associated with many interpenetrating mental, social, emotional, practical, cognitive features that we do not necessarily associate with the attitude towards cultural otherness. The holistic approach also requires taking into account the context in which the child lives, his experiences and biography. In this light, the child turns out to be unique.

This concept of the child is the opposite of standardization, because the latter is based on the expectation of uniformity and the so-called „leveling” of children's development, which has a destructive effect (Żytko, 2020). The standardizing orientation, clearly dominant in Polish education, is reinforced

by developmental psychology, which - as culturally and critically oriented psychologists indicate - has become the psychology of norms and has lost children (Burman, 2008). Standardization and normalization of development leads to the fact that “decontextualizing the child, we lose sight of children and their lives: their concrete experiences, their actual capabilities, their theories, feelings, and hopes (...) Instead of concrete descriptions and reflections on children’s doings and thinking, on their hypotheses and theories of the world, we easily end up with simple mappings of children’s lives, general classifications of the child of the kind that say ‘children of such and such an age are like that’” (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 36-37). In that perspective, being different means a developmental deficiency or dysfunction, and consequently the necessity to be submitted to unifying “therapy”. It gives standardized diagnostics an exclusive power and induces a closure of potential areas for the child’s development.

Children are expected to be “normal” (i.e. “the same”) in almost every area of their functioning: knowledge, reading, counting, motor skills, behaviour in the classroom, preferred values, control over emotions, etc. Differences between children are recognized only in a vertical perspective (better – worse, more – less, higher – lower). There is no space and acceptance for children’s diversity in all its rich ways of manifestation in a horizontal perspective.

Children perfectly perceive this type of expectations of teachers and other adults and develop in themselves that otherness is abnormal. Even if their feelings and observations do not directly concern culture differences, children generalize and transfer their attitude to them as well. In this way, a quantitative and non-holistic focus on standards can implicitly establish the monocultural norms.

Conclusions

Finding oneself in a world of constant encounters and interpenetration of cultures, and the competence to cope with the resultant challenges requires undertaking educational effort as early as possible, because „only in school can we initiate changes to a sufficient extent in awareness concerning the attitude towards what is culturally different be initiated on an appropriate scale” (Sobecki, 1999, p. 96). However, multicultural education does not always have to be explicitly expressed by content about other cultures. The most important thing here is a more general attitude, which requires a change in the model of education and thinking about children’s development. The point is to build a broader approach to other people and to oneself, based

on a multidimensional perception of the similar in the different and the different in the similar.

I use the phrase “towards another person and towards oneself” because of the importance of achieving a balance between the attitude towards other cultures and one’s own culture. It is essential to avoid both erroneous directions of thinking in multicultural education: when we depreciate other cultures, or when we depreciate our own culture (analogously, when it comes to interpersonal relations, accepting others requires accepting oneself). Attitudes of dialogical openness and respect for other cultures must be accompanied by building one’s own cultural identity and expecting respect for our culture. J. Nikitorowicz, writing that “Cultural diversity was and is the wealth of humanity” (2003, p. 1), gets our attention to the close connection between openness to other cultures and growing up in one’s own. As he writes: “It is essential in the development process to create the principle – the more I participate in my culture, the more I notice others” (ibid.).

Multicultural, holistic and inclusive – means being open to others and other cultures, but also respectful of yourself and your own culture. Building a cultural identity without feeling guilty and stigmatizing one’s own culture means expanding your identity, not rejecting it in favour of another.

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