

Reflective Practice as a Manifestation of Intercultural Competences in the Work of Teachers

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The article is a form of pedeutological reflection embedded in the context of a new professional and social situation that requires teachers and other school employees to quickly adapt to changes and add new social, intercultural and advanced digital competences. The author argues that certain workshop shortcomings will not have a significant impact on the education process, if the teacher retains the ability to flexibly reflect on their actions and approach their tasks. The effectiveness of didactic activities in a culturally and linguistically heterogeneous class will not only depend on the teacher's skills, but also on how reflectively the teacher approaches their work.

Key words: Intercultural education, digital environment, school children with migration experience, school children with unregulated legal status, reflective practice, remote education, multicultural education, multilingual classroom, multicultural educational environment

Introduction

The migration processes which have been intensifying in the last decade are creating new types of social relations. These processes are subject to research from the perspective of many disciplines, including anthropology, psychology, sociology, cultural studies, and recently also pedagogy and language teaching. The scope of this conducted research depends, amongst others, on what kind of migration processes are under observation. In the literature, attempts have been made to organize the typol-

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ogy and classification of migration, most often understood as a territorial transfer of individuals or groups (Nowicka 2011: 8). The process is often considered according to the following useful dimensions:

- compulsion vs voluntariness,
- mass versus singularity,
- internal vs external,
- temporary vs permanent (Nowicka 2011: 9).

Due to the scope of this study, the focus will be on forced and individual, external migrations, without the possibility of indicating whether and how long the stay in Poland will last. The indicated parameters reflect the essence of the migration situation of refugee children with irregular legal status staying in centres for foreigners. Often, without certainty as to how long they will be in Poland, they start studying at a Polish school in Poland. Regardless of their legal status, they are subject to compulsory schooling and education. They go into the education system, to a Polish school, bringing a new value with their presence. They have the opportunity to gain knowledge and experience not only in the context of the achievements of their own society, but also the culture of the country where they are currently staying. Like any migrant, they face difficulties in a foreign country and culture. These difficulties will be of a various nature, intensity and consequences: starting from emotional problems, through institutional and health problems. They will implement adaptation strategies, helpful in organizing their everyday life, learning in a new school, learning a new language, and finding their place in a new culture. Their teachers play a key role in this situation.

The paper is an analysis of a case study consisting of seven interviews with teachers of the Primary School in Bezwola, where Polish students and students from refugee families study. The author aimed to present from the perspective of the teachers the dynamic process of changes taking place in education in Poland resulting from the phenomenon of global mobility. Conclusions drawn from the statements of teachers – reflective practitioners, who carry out their tasks in a culturally and linguistically diverse school environment – can be a starting point for the formulation of theoretical, organizational and methodological assumptions for inclusive and intercultural education.

Teacher Competences for New Realities

New professional and social realities, work in a multicultural and multilingual educational environment, and (from March 2020) remote education are all requiring teachers and other school employees to quickly adapt to changes and add new social, intercultural and advanced digital competences. "Special types of competences is needed to be able to cope with everyday school situations that differ significantly from the common, culturally known and obvious" (Dobrowolska, 2012: 27). Com-

petences include the proven ability to apply knowledge, skills, and personal, social and methodological abilities, allowing the person to act effectively in complex and unpredictable situations, skilfully applying knowledge, not reproducing it.

Cichocki emphasizes that competence “expresses the ability to transfer knowledge and skills to new situations within a task situation, it also includes work organization and planning, readiness to introduce innovations and deal with unusual tasks; they are also personality traits necessary for effective cooperation and collaboration” (Cichocki, 2014: 112–113). Each of these elements is updated and improved in professional practice. This depends on the social conditions in which the teacher performs their work.

The dynamics of these changes means that increasingly often we have the opportunity to observe the shifting of “ points of gravity in the school’s work from focusing on the lessons and didactic activities of the teacher, dominating in traditional pedagogy, towards a clear increase in the importance of educational, preventive and therapeutic functions. (...) The ability to see and understand students’ problems and help in solving them significantly influences the effectiveness of the teacher’s work” (Szempruch, 2012: 8).

The most important parameters of the social context of teachers’ work in recent years are two phenomena: migration and the Covid-19 pandemic. Migration has changed the educational environment from monocultural and monolingual to multicultural and multilingual. The pandemic, in turn, has moved the Polish school into the digital environment. Both the migration process and the constant presence of digital technologies constitutes an opportunity and – at the same time – a challenge for Polish schools. Both phenomena have also opened up the risk of exclusion and marginalization.

The study of this type of risk is one of the dimensions of the “Micreate” project implemented in Poland by the Interkulturalni.pl Association in partnership with five other European countries under the Horizon 2020 program (www.micreate.eu). Assuming that the educational systems of European countries have to adapt to social changes, research was undertaken in the project, the aim of which was, among others, to expand knowledge about the life experiences of children in new social environments, to study the dynamics of peer relations in schools in the context of the integration process and to use the potential of teachers and educational staff to manage diversity. The main purpose of getting to know the last of the above-mentioned aspects was qualitative research. The method applied is that of the study, the universal application of which is emphasized by the quote: “By transdisciplinary, we are suggesting that case study has no particular disciplinary orientation; that is, it can be used in social science, science, applied science, business, fine arts, and humanities research, for example. We regard heuristic at its most general level as an approach that focuses one’s attention during learning, construction, discovery, or problem solving” (Wynsberghe R., Khan S., 2007: 80). The aim of the research was to learn about the perspective of teachers reflecting on changes taking place in education in Poland resulting from the phenomenon of global mobility. The new, remote dimension of

education forced by the pandemic was also taken into account. The interview scenario assumed obtaining information in areas such as upbringing, integration and didactics and obtaining answers to the following questions:

1. how teachers perceive cultural differences,
2. how they assess the integration process in the school and local community (strengths and weaknesses of this process) and
3. what solutions are used during the implementation of didactic processes in a multicultural and multilingual educational environment (including remote education)?

The presented research was conducted at a school in Bezwola, a village in the Wołyń commune in the Lublin Voivodeship. Among other schools in Poland, it is distinguished by the fact that it is a school that has admitted children with an irregular legal status living in the nearby centre for foreigners for many years. The first foreign school children appeared in the school in 2008. The dynamics of demographic changes at school related to the establishment of a refugee center in Bezwola are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Foreign students in Bezwola school in years 2008–2021

Academic year	Number of foreign students
2008/09	17
2009/10	29
2011/12	no data available
2013/14	35
2014/15	49
2015/16	87
2016/17	100
2017/18	43
2018/19	2
2019/20	17
2020/21	8

Source: own study based on data obtained at the school in Bezwola

Up to the school year 2020/2021, a total of 378 school children with unregulated legal status studied here. School children came from countries such as Chechnya, Dagestan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Ingushetia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Russia, Mongolia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Lithuania, and Belarus. Therefore, we can assume

that teachers in this school are pioneers in the field of education in a multicultural and multilingual school environment in Poland. The way in which they supported the process of the adaptation of foreign school children and the integration of the multicultural school environment is mentioned in the interviews conducted in the fall of 2020. Seven semi-structured interviews (six with teachers and one with an intercultural assistant) were carried out. During the interviews, the interviewees were asked the same questions, allowing them to freely shape their statements, digress and add things they found to be important.

The study group consists of an essential part of the teaching staff of the Bezwola school. They are teachers associated with the school for many years, employed full-time, combining the tasks of subject teachers with the tasks of educators. When selecting the respondents, the period of employment in this particular school was primarily taken into account, however this rule does not apply to the intercultural assistant. Many years of work at the school in Bezwola allow teachers to perceive education and upbringing as a dynamic process. The professional experience gained first in a monocultural school, where only Polish children studied and which then developed in a multicultural school, is a valuable field of self-reflection and self-observation. These processes were analysed in the study. It is important to mention that it was also significant for the research that teachers live in close proximity to the school and can confront their experiences and reflections with the thought patterns of the local environment and local authorities.

Schooling: Perception of Cultural Differences by Teachers

Migration puts the individual in a cultural confrontation: the ways of acting which are known from the culture of the country of origin may turn out to be inadequate in the new cultural environment. The cultural experience so far may not necessarily be a useful resource in other circumstances. This type of mismatch is often referred to as a cultural difference. In the school environment, such differences are picked up by teachers observing the behaviour of their school children and their parents. The inadequate behaviour of school children is a call for teachers to undertake educational activities. In turn, teachers try to understand and accept the culturally unrecognized behaviour of parents.

Many of them pay attention to the collective behaviour of school children and their parents, expressed by a mutual concern for foreign school children, interest, readiness to undertake aid activities, as well as solidarity and loyalty. For example, teachers emphasize the readiness of school children to support those who need help, especially at the beginning of their stay at school: *They are also very caring. For example, a boy could not speak Polish at all, some single words (...). It was his friend, his peer, who sat with him and explained: this is a letter like this, it is a word like this, this is what*

that means. So it's really nice, they help each other. This kind of help and collective behaviour are also displayed by the parents of pupils, e.g. during the organization of school picnics, for which the parents of foreign pupils prepared a meal together.

Teachers often point out that they are an authority for foreign school children and their parents. It is also often expressed in terms of respect and recognition. *Children appreciate teachers. You feel appreciated.* And in another interview: *The parents of refugees have great respect for their teachers.*

With cultural conditions, teachers also clearly explain the different behaviours of girls and boys, sometimes comparing them with Polish children: *Foreign school children, I think about Muslim women (...) dress in traditional clothes, others wear "European" clothes, but never dress or behave in a provocative manner, which is not so rare for Polish school children. They don't use profanity. They will complain if they hear a "płachoje słowo" (a bad word). They look away from the illustrations in textbooks (sculptures, reproductions of paintings) showing elements of nudity. Many girls refuse to wear sports clothes during PE. (...) Boys are generally inclined to resolve disputes by force. There are cases of fights. During a teacher's intervention, they explain that this is a game ("pan, my igrajem"). In fact, wrestling (sometimes brutal) is a popular form of entertainment. They like martial arts.*

The interviews provided show that teachers accept the behaviour of school children that do not violate Polish cultural norms (*We respect any refusal to participate in certain areas of school life, if they result from ideological reasons*) and undertake educational activities whenever the behaviour and behaviour of school children with experience of migration differs from accepted customs and rules. Such actions were taken, for example, in relation to property which foreign school children did not respect (cases of spoiling or even destroying accessories, textbooks, school equipment are more frequent than in the case of Polish children. There is a problem with this at school, with cases of the misappropriation of pens, crayons, plasticine, toys. Also, some sanitary methods were shocking for Polish school children and teachers, and were related to civilization differences between the toilets in the Polish school and the school in the country of origin.

Integration: Assessment of Strengths and Weaknesses of the Process

The presence and interpenetration of cultures in the school in Bezwola may lead to the belief that a new, common culture is emerging. This belief stems from the fact that the most obvious and visible layer of culture is relatively easy to absorb and accept. This layer consists of elements such as language, clothes, cuisine and school rituals. The subsequent layers, including norms, values, habits and attitudes, are already more difficult to observe, sometimes also difficult to understand and accept. However,

the most difficult are the elements of the deepest layer of culture: values. It is in this layer that the understanding of the concept of good and evil, relationships with other people, time, space, etc. is embedded.

The process of integration at school takes place “by the way” of activities constituting school rituals resulting from holidays and traditions. Teachers are aware of children having a right to a separate culture and behaviour, including those resulting from principles set by religion. They do not impose an obligation on foreign school children to actively participate in celebrations that may violate the school children’s values. It seems, however, that the constant presence of certain rituals typical of Polish schools and embedded in the national and Catholic culture involuntarily leads to psychological acculturation, which, according to Berry, refers to changes taking place in a person who is exposed to a different culture, and is a participant in a direct situation of influence of external culture (Boski 2009:116–120).). It is highly probable that there is an involuntary and voluntary process of acquiring norms, ways of behaviour, customs adopted in the culture of the receiving society, analogous to enculturation, i.e. the process of acquiring and assimilating one’s culture, e.g. as a result of educational processes, peer relations, the education system, etc.

The teachers describe the observed manifestations of this process: *Foreign children, including Muslims, willingly take part in patriotic ceremonies, and even those related to the religious life of our school. They perform in nativity plays, religious song competitions. Their thinking amounts to: this activity is nice and good.*

They also try to indicate the reasons for the involvement of refugee school children in new and culturally alien school rituals (religious or patriotic), highlighting:

- religious conditioning as respect for other people: *At school, we emphasize our commitment to Christian values and hence respect our Muslim school children and parents;*
- cultural proximity: *I think that their integration with our society is accepted, they are not rejected. Our Slavic character suits them better than life in Germany, Sweden or Austria, where they have to fight for everything;*
- the importance of the size of the school, competences and experience of teachers: *I will make this thesis: that if there is a school, like in Bezwola, to which foreign children come, and there is 50-50 ratio, this is the optimal model. It is easier for children in a larger school to become involved or to isolate them more easily because it depends on individual situations and teachers’ competences. In a large school where the percentage of foreign children is small, it is difficult to find teachers who would notice these children and work with him or her. In contrast, in a school with a high percentage, like ours, this is a priority which helps accumulate experience;*
- teachers’ commitment to appreciate the culture of foreign school children, the principle of reciprocity: *The teachers started to perform Chechen dances and the children were very happy about it. Grassroots work matters.*

The integration process largely depends on the preparation of the host environment. Part of such preparation may be ensuring that school children have a basic knowledge of other cultures and religions, working with stereotypes and modelling attitudes. Teachers express their belief in the complexity of this process in many places in their interviews, pointing to – on the one hand – the chances of understanding over differences and – on the other hand – the risk to the integration process.

In the information provided, they indicate the following activities carried out by them to integrate the communities:

- intercultural mediation: *There was an incident with the cross when one boy wanted to remove the cross at Easter and I had to explain to him that it was a different culture and explain his behaviour to other children;*
- modelling attitudes, building empathy: *Also, as we say all the time, you can't make fun of them because there are different situations, and you could also find yourself in such a place. For example, what would you do if you had to flee your home? And in another interview: If we were to start showing our Polish children from an early age that they are the same kids, have the same needs, sorrows, need the same feelings, I think that the sooner you start this lesson of tolerance, not even tolerance itself, because it's not just about tolerating, but about being together, not being next to it, but together; that would be important;*
- education about other cultures and the countries of origin of new school children: *We talk a lot during the group hour. (...) For example, Chechen children talk about their nationality, about their country, about their anthem, we listen to their national anthem, we talk about our country – what symbols we have, what is it like in Poland, about tolerance and kindness;*
- intercultural sensitization: *The same boy refused to accept a prize for the best student, he refused very politely, because it was about the monuments of Poland, and three-quarters of the monuments in Poland are churches. I was the one who went home to exchange this book for him because I had just bought a new encyclopaedia.*

In the opinion of the respondents, a major threat to the integration process are such local elements as:

- no local integration policy: *The only area of contact between the residents of the refugee centre and the local community are meetings of parents at school;*
- systemic misunderstanding of the risks associated with migration: *Emigration is traumatic for a child. Perhaps another one after the one they experienced in their home country. And the system of education, admitting foreign children does not show concern for psychological and pedagogical care;*
- lack of money for integration, systematic activities: *The money has run out. The Government has changed and the money for such projects has run out.*

Someone might say it was money down the drain. But it was a great thing, and there should be money for such things. I feel terribly sad about it;

- stereotypes and prejudices, also presented by opinion leaders (parents, teachers, priests): *at the beginning of the year, Polish children isolate a foreign school child, sometimes they follow the teacher a bit because the teacher ignores the child too. Fed on stereotypes at home, they keep their distance. And elsewhere in the same interview: During the sermon, the priest called for hostility towards the refugees who “will kill us” and in another interview: It is worse on the Polish side. It seems to me that these parents are so prejudiced, very cautious, and put up barriers because I think that if Polish families also showed such a desire, it would be completely different, it would be very nice and enjoyable.*

Didactics: the Search for Solutions

The teacher’s professionalism is not only a competence, but also a reflective approach to tasks, including mistakes. According to BD Gołębnik (1998: 144–145), “a reflective practice may have some technical deficiencies, do something inept (‘incompetently’), not very effectively, but having the ability to reflect on the actions, the teacher will ‘improve’ after some time, will improve their teaching.” Reflective practice is used to individualize the education process and to take into account the element of surprise, which seems to be particularly important in education in a multicultural school environment. Competences and reflections are complemented by a flexible approach to tasks. Such conclusions are reached by the American sociologist Veblen (after Polak, 2012: 15), who dealt with human functioning in a situation of change and noted that the “lack of flexibility in action and closure to the constantly changing world means that their current competences (knowledge , skills, habits) instead of helping them to meet new requirements, become dysfunctional and block adaptation possibilities.” Efficient implementation of didactic activities in a culturally and linguistically heterogeneous class will not only depend on the teacher’s competences, but also on how reflectively the teacher approaches their work.

The analysis of the interviews obtained shows that teachers at the school in Bezwoła are aware of the need for a flexible, reflective and individualized approach to school children with experience of migration. In their work, they often go beyond the usual framework, reach for competences that have not been used in monocultural and monolingual schools, and look for new solutions. Most of their activities take the form of adjustments based on the diagnosis of the didactic situation defined by the current linguistic and intellectual abilities of the school children and embedded in specific inclusive (integration) activities. By arranging the obtained information, we can indicate several types of adjustments in the field of teaching activities, including during distance education:

- an active approach to communication with the child, allowing the child to use their own language: *In the classroom I speak a mix of Polish and Russian to them, but it works.* And in another interview: *I also try to speak Russian, because I know it a little bit, so mainly Russian and a little Polish, a mixture of them* or during remote education: *They then work better in the classroom when you speak a little Russian to them;*
- methodological adjustments, e.g. in mathematics during remote education: *I sent them three-minute videos because I thought they would stand it for three minutes – how to hold the ruler, how to use a set square...;* in Polish language lessons: *We limited the material (...) the Polish teacher created other simple things for them to limit the material, but so that there was still contact with the Polish language* and in the class during English lessons: *I look at them to know what they are interested in. They like art very much, painting, playing with plasticine, they like to sing very much, so I use that during the lessons;*
- individualisation and management of school children's success is treated by teachers as the goal of their activities, a commitment: *It is the school's duty, to see the potential of the child and how it can develop this potential.*

Most interviewees highlighted that the period of distance learning was a period of linguistic regression for most of the school children. Teachers associated it with being excluded from the Polish-speaking environment, the lack of exposure to the Polish language and an absence of linguistic activities. A major obstacle, especially in the first stage of distance learning, was digital exclusion: school children did not have access to computers, tablets, etc. They sometimes had smartphones but these were not enough to fully participate in lessons. With great effort, thanks to a nationwide campaign, teachers collected the equipment required for remote education for school children. This did not remove all the obstacles, as it turned out that the school children were not proficient with the hardware and software. As a result, for example, they were unable to log into an educational platform. This situation meant that teachers often conducted individual lessons, over the phone, sent tasks via a messaging platform or in the form of a text message. The teachers are convinced that school children from the centre for foreigners really need direct contact with Polish teachers and Polish children. (...) *Quarantine does not serve these children, they close themselves off to Polish culture, to the language.*

Conclusion

The issues raised above, including both dynamic social processes (mainly the phenomenon of global mobility) and the need to redefine the role of the school and the teacher in the era of the cultural and digital revolution, as well as the definition of new teaching competences, make working at school a great challenge. This is especially true in

a culturally and linguistically diverse class, when the child does not know Polish or only poorly. The appropriate preparation of teachers is therefore a must. School children with special educational needs, including difficulties in communication related to their place of origin and/or resulting from the migration experience, can count on the adaptation of requirements and individualization of the teaching process but their goal is to obtain autonomy in terms of acquiring and presenting knowledge, communicating with peers and others in both formal and informal situations. The key to success is the teacher; an appropriately prepared and reflective teacher will feel better, work more efficiently and will be able to enjoy their student's progress to a much greater extent.

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