

## **The Rights of the Child in a Changing Multicultural Society: New Perspectives for the Future Generation**

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Topic: **Cultural diversity and children's rights. How to support the children and their rights – some examples from the NGO praxis in Poland.**

### **Summary**

This presentation is concerned with the very significant topic of children's rights in the culturally diversified society of Poland and in a Changing Multicultural Society. The discussion includes teaching children's rights in the view of some examples of good praxis applied to young individuals - citizens of the EU (polish children), as well as the "culturally other" children of immigrants and refugees living and staying (legally or otherwise) in one of the EU countries.

I would like to focus your attention on the following issues:

- the need of teaching children their rights and about their rights in a Changing, Multicultural Society;
- the reality of learning and teaching about children's rights in the culturally diversified society of Poland and whether such reality exists;
- certain projects and initiatives held by NGOs in cultural centers of Poland, such as cities, along with some examples of good praxis addressed to the social majority as well as to migrants and refugees in the borderland areas, and providing information on different multicultural minorities, in an attempt to raise awareness and eagerness to meet and communicate with individuals from different cultures, where children's rights play an especially significant part;
- projects addressed to cultural minorities (national and ethnic minorities, migrants and refugees) as means of supporting the process of their adaption, integration and rights.

The main aim of my speech is to present problems in the implementation and realization of the topic of 'The Rights of the Child in a Changing Polish Multicultural Society', and to show some existing examples of ideas concerning the implementation of children's rights in projects directed at children and youth in a multicultural society. The following points will be illustrated with practical examples from good NGO praxis.

### **The need of teaching children their rights and about their rights in a Changing, Multicultural Society**

Why do I think that this particular topic, and especially the children's right to education, bears such significance in today's world? Because, as Yves Buannic remarked, "For the world to progress, the children need to participate in the process", and that is why they need to understand what their rights are. It is of utmost importance that these rights be known and communicated. The children need this knowledge and skills for their own

development. Children and youth, being the potential participants in and recipients of the intercultural activities which we, the educators, engineer, will soon decide the character of multicultural politics and bear significant influence on the processes of shaping values, modes of behavior and social relations in their living environment, as well as in wider circles of the society. The knowledge they gain in the field of rights, abilities and competences pertaining to the questions of intercultural communication and relations may prove to be an important starting point for initiating communication, dialogue and cooperation in a contrasted world, as well as for respecting children's rights.

Societies are not homogeneous nor are they static. We live in a plural, diversified, multiethnic and multi-religious Europe, where mobility and migration are the norm. Societies need to work towards accepting different lifestyles and displaying a willingness to share rights and responsibilities. Integration is a challenge for all groups in society and a touchstone of the ability to live in and maintain a peaceful co-existence in a diversified, open society based on the principle of equal opportunities for everyone.

The topic of children's rights is not new, yet in the dimensions of cultural differentiation and multiple affiliations it was simply not given sufficient regard in the course of socio - pedagogical activities. What I have in mind is the bi-culturality of an individual, his or her multi - identity<sup>1</sup>, as in the modern society human beings identify themselves with numerous groups and are thus influenced by multiple factors: cultural, linguistic, religious, etc. Children, in a manner similar to adults, build their cultural identities on the basis of different group affiliations. Young individuals are furthermore active initiators of social changes in the groups to which they belong. That is why, only by educating children as to their rights may we give the whole, increasingly multicultural, society a chance to improve its living conditions and multicultural dialogue. The popularization of children's rights in the whole diverse world should be our goal.

In Poland, the last research on the issue of children's rights awareness commissioned by the UNICEF and conducted among a representative sample of children and teenagers, took place in 2001. The results indicate that only 13% of respondents declared having extensive knowledge of human rights, 52% were in possession of some information, and 35% knew little or nothing on the topic. When asked in greater detail about specific laws that they are aware of, 71% mentioned the right to education and play, 51% - the right to feeling of safety and to healthcare, 49% - the right to freedom and dignity, 30% - the right to family and care. In article 42 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, the States Parties are obliged to popularize information concerning the rules and guidelines of the Convention among both the adults, as well as children, by employing the means available to them. The legal system present in Poland describes in detail the rights of children, including the right to information and to being aware of one's rights. Preamble to the bill on the educational system contains references to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention of the Rights of the Child. The questions relating to children's rights should thus be present in schools. Why, then, so few children are aware of their own rights, which is especially evident in culturally - diversified environments? In the majority of schools, issues connected with children's rights are included in teaching

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<sup>1</sup> This notion has been described by numerous authors as 'hybrid identity', 'nomadic identity' or 'multiple affiliation'.

curricula. However, a program or subject which would present the question in a systematic manner does not exist. The topic is, therefore, mentioned only in addition to other subjects and usually in a restricted form. A further problem is the one lack of competence among tutors in the area of teaching children their rights. Workshops or trainings relating to this question do sporadically occur for selected teachers; nevertheless they are unavailable to the majority of individuals who ought to be dealing with these questions. Consequently, children who were taught about their rights and are frequently able even to recite them do not understand their meaning and the practical implications. There are furthermore occurrences of not only failing to educate about the rights of children, but also of violating them.

It seems vital to create an atmosphere of universal respect for the rights of others in schools, where children from different cultures will not be familiarized with the theory, but will also have the chance to discover their rights in practice on the one hand, and to learn how to respect the rights of other individuals on the other. The knowledge of children's rights is the first step to improve the condition of children belonging to different cultural groups in Poland. Furthermore, mechanisms need to be introduced which would allow young individuals to obtain assistance and support in situations when their rights are violated due to bias and stereotypes. No research exists on the topic of children's rights in culturally – diverse environments of Poland.

### **Intercultural diversity in Poland – a short introduction**

Compared to other European countries, the percentage of minorities and immigrants in Poland is not large. There currently are 13 national and ethnic minorities recognised by law. They constitute between 3 – 4 percent of the Polish population. The minorities are: Germans, Ukrainians, Ormians, Belarussians, Russians, Latvians, Slovaks, Jews and Czechs. Furthermore, there exist representatives of four ethnic minorities: Karaims, Łemkowie, Roma and Tatars. In addition, certain areas of the Pomorskie Voivodeship are inhabited by the Kashubian community, speaking the regional language. The Polish law defines in detail the rights of national and ethnic minorities.

On the other hand, in Poland the number of migrants and refugees belonging to new cultural groups is constantly growing; the majority come from China, Vietnam, Tchetchnya, Bielarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Abchazia, South Osetia, Armenia, Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan and certain African countries. Due to the growing number of migrants and refugees in Poland cultural conflicts appear, most of them taking place in schools. They result from a lack of understanding of cultural differences, and lead to social exclusion and creation of barriers in integration. As means of preventing such occurrences, cultural mediation between Poles and members of other nationalities, as well as between different groups of foreigners, is conducted by experienced intercultural mediators in Warsaw, among other areas. This solution may be regarded as accepted praxis in other countries, yet in Poland it has only been introduced recently, as a response to the emergence of formerly nonexistent issues.

### **The reality of learning and teaching children's rights in the culturally diversified society of Poland**

The main issue which Poland, as a country accepting migrants and refugees, is now facing is the fact that refugee centers are located outside, cities or at their outskirts, which inhibits integration and alienates new cultural groups. Of equal importance is the fact that

migrants and refugees frequently regard our country as a transit point, which they plan to leave after a number of months to seek improved existence in Western Europe, or escape to reconnect with their families and friends. Thus, the integrational projects directed at them by the government and NGOs do not always bring upon a positive change.

The second problem relating to the realization of activities targeted at the promotion of children's rights in intercultural education in a culturally diverse society, in the context of a constant experiencing of a different culture, is the repetition of a false stereotype, in the light of which "*de facto* and *de jure* multiculturalism does not create a basis for unity and harmony"<sup>2</sup>. Poland exhibits issues connected with the realization of a coherent and consequent integration Policy<sup>3</sup>, which would provide benefits for the foreigners, as well as Polish citizens, particularly in relation to observing their rights, including the rights of the child to education, development and respect. Education about the rights is a further essential question, which directly relates to the social consciousness and influences mutual relations and cooperation between the majority and the minorities. Lack of an integration policy results directly in inadequate praxis in the field of education. This bears further consequences in that an absence of activities directed at children's rights pertaining to the process of education in culturally diverse environments is highly noticeable. A single, and now practically unavailable European Council sourcebook relating to topics from the area of human rights – 'Kompas' and 'Kompasito' – is certainly not enough. There further exists a necessity of covering wider and more distant or problematic topics, such as "My rights and the rights of the child in developing countries", "Children's rights and the Millennium Development Goals", "Rights of girls and boys in countries under conflict, in the face of migrations and climate changes".

In the course of my preparations, I also interviewed practitioners in the field of informal education about their knowledge and realization of projects pertaining to the processes of learning and teaching children's rights in the culturally diversified society of Poland. The following quotes come from conversations with NGO trainers and coordinators of intercultural educational projects directed at Polish, as well as refugee and migrant children in Poland:

*„Personally I haven't conducted any such projects. I also don't remember anyone in my town or region who would do so. We certainly touched on the issues of violating human rights in the context of refugees, but such actions were limited to presentations of films, discussions on human rights, etc.”*

*„Children's education about the human rights is very primitive both in schools and outside. I don't recall any research on the topic. The only educational element which comes to my mind are the few Roma school assistants.”*

*„Children's rights education in a culturally diverse society? That's a tough question... Of course, we discussed the educational rights and possibilities of refugee and migrant children, but only during teacher meetings, never directly with children themselves.”*

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<sup>2</sup> Kamińska K., Kwiatkowska A. (red.), 2009, Jesteśmy tacy sami. Sztuka w edukacji międzykulturowej, Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, Warszawa, s. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Despite the European Council's acceptance of the Common Basic Principles of Immigrant Integration Policy in 2004, in addition to the fact that ensuring proper living conditions, along with a non-discriminatory educational and housing policy, are key factors in the successful integration of migrants and refugees, the policies of EU countries in this area proves to be less than satisfactory.

„Children's rights aren't the main topic of any of the activities conducted by the Centre for Civic Education, especially that we do not possess any materials concerning children's rights in a multicultural context”.

*“What comes to my mind (though it doesn't strictly fit) is the experience of such multicultural activities as for example the children space during the Warsaw Intercultural Street Party.”*

On the grounds of formal education, elements connected with children's rights are present in the following curricula: Civic Education in junior high schools (a curriculum and a sourcebook entitled 'Civic Education in municipal schools', published by the Centre for Civic Education). Children's rights and human rights are one of the topics present in this publication. The New Curriculum states: „students should be able to enumerate the most significant articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the *European Convention on Human Rights* and the Convention of the Rights of the Child.” The above requirements are an element of the fourth stage of education, basic level of the Civic Education subject. A second curriculum in which connections to Human Rights may be found is the „Student Government” program, interpreted as a right of each pupil to be involved in social action. By means of this project, students are encouraged to enforce their rights, included in the educational bill. As can be clearly seen in both these cases, Human Rights and Children's Rights are topics outside the main scope of attention in Polish education. The question of the rights of the child, in the context of the right to education and the Millennium Development Goals, is also to a small extent present in the New Curriculum, in sections pertaining to global education.

The question of children's rights and respecting them in the context of multicultural environments appear in relation to the creation of the functions of a Roma and a Foreign Assistants, established as means of answering the needs of culturally – different students attending Polish schools. The aid of an Assistant greatly facilitates the process of understanding problems encountered by the Roma and foreign students, whether they result from an insufficient knowledge of the Polish language, anxiety, trauma or other sources, and thus the children's right to education is respected. It is worth remembering that a significant source of educational difficulties plaguing the Roma children in Poland is the fact that, as their national language is Romani, their skill in Polish is often significantly lower than that of their Polish peers. If we add to that the lack of pre-school education (which up to the present moment has been occurring in 100% of cases), as well as a less restrictive mode of upbringing, it is easy to imagine the problems which Polish teachers find themselves suddenly facing. In practice, a teacher has to tackle these issues without any knowledge of the Roma culture and reality. Finally, as the Roma are an ethnic group attributed with exclusively negative stereotypes, and tutors are by no means free from these, tragedies may happen very easily.

After analyzing numerous intercultural, regional and European projects conducted by schools and NGOs in Poland, as well as talking to educators, I have developed a strong conviction that by laboriously seeking out examples of good praxis and proudly presenting exceptions, we only legitimize the current state of affairs. Maybe a time has come to resign from such behavior and admit that we do not have any achievements whatsoever in the field, and thus need change. In order to introduce it, we must make an attempt to respond to the following simple questions:

- Do we want to teach children's rights in multiculturalism, and if yes, why?
- Are we aware of the needs of children and young people in this area?
- Do we have the knowledge necessary to put such undertakings into practice?
- Do we have programs and tools necessary for the realization of this type of projects?

The answers appear to be rather complicated. They require cooperation between the majority, the national and ethnic minorities, as well as refugees and migrants, in the field of teaching children's rights in culturally – diverse environments.

### What should our aims and targets be?

It seems that, in accordance with the EU priorities, we are heading towards integration of cultures, yet often without taking into account the practical dimension of children's rights and their education. If we consider for a moment the meaning of the term "integration of cultures", it reveals itself to be immensely complicated and rich in meanings. "Integration" is a transformation of multiple factors into a unified whole, and in the political-pragmatic view, an economic and socio-cultural adaptation to the dominant structures. Such an understanding implies a will or ability of the migrants and refugees to integrate with their new country, and thus also the awareness of rights and obligations. It is a well – known fact that not everyone possesses such eagerness or perceives such a necessity, which nevertheless does not release us from being responsible for the realization of children's rights education in a culturally diverse society.

Children rights in multicultural education cannot be treated as an addition to the „regular" education. This stems from the birth of multicultural societies as a world phenomenon and also from the diversified needs of students coming from the same, but also frequently from different cultural circles. Institutions of formal education are not able to answer the demands of the modern world. They do not provide the authentic learning that involves knowledge about children rights and participation in activities connected with the fascinating process of achieving knowledge and self – development in multiculturalism. Children rights and multicultural education should be understood as an important educational and multicultural perspective and ought to be introduced in all forms and on all levels of education.

### Examples of projects and initiatives held by NGOs in the cultural centers of Poland

I would now like to present selected examples of good praxis which contain elements of teaching children's rights in multiculturalism, taken from projects conducted in Warsaw and on the eastern Polish borderland.

An example of the practical teaching of rights in multicultural relations is the Polish - Ugandan **"Life Mission – Białystok CALM"** project. This undertaking was realized in 2009 in eastern Poland (Różany Stok, Białystok). The main aim of the project was intercultural education in the local environment, by means of allowing gifted children from the Mission a chance of artistic development, and simultaneously familiarizing the local inhabitants, including young individuals from an educational centre, with the culturally other, and breaking mental barriers, as well as destroying stereotypes. The project took the form of activities combining music, meditation, psychology and physical exercise. A meeting with students from the Białystok Mechanical School took place, combined with a tour of its facilities and a chance to know each other better. Furthermore, a Poland – Uganda soccer match for

young individuals was organized. In the course of workshops combining dance and theatrical activities, a video was created for a song written and performed by the Ugandans, with assistance from their friend from the educational centre. In addition, a documentary, graffiti and a theatrical performance combining elements of African dancing and acrobatics with breakdance performed by local Poles. (If time allows I would like to present a short video fragment of this event after my presentation).

A short movie fragment: “Life Mission – Białystok CALM”

The second project is the „**Tibet. True stories**”, a graphic novel by The Other Space Foundation in Warsaw. It is directed at children and youth in Poland and presents the issues connected with the everyday life and rights of Tibetan children. The graphic novel was prepared with the assistance of a group of individuals from Tibet living in Warsaw, whose children attend Polish schools. Only a small group of Tibetan citizens remain in Poland, and the problems they face are presented exclusively by means of the mass media, and for that reason it was of immense importance to present the question of observing the rights of Tibetan children to Polish students.

Another example of an NGO project realized on the Polish borderland is the „**Enrichment by diversity; intercultural education in the face of integration of Polish and Tchechnyan children**” from 2009. The project included workshops (at schools and in other areas) on the topics of intercultural education and communication directed at Polish and Tchechnyan children living in Białystok and residing in a refugee centre, as well as additional meetings, i.e. chechnyan dance workshops, cooking workshops (where Polish and Chechnyan mothers prepared traditional meals together), a tour of the objects of cultural legacy in Białystok, activities directed at intercultural communication, solving conflicts, classes on the topics connected with refugees and their problems, as well as similarities and differences between the Polish and Chechnyan culture. Further areas of discussion included: “Diversity Similarities & differences between people”, “Understanding others”. In addition, integrational meetings for urban communities of Białystok and the Chechnyans also took place. These included presentations of the Chechnyan culture, and their indirect result was the discussion on the issue of children’s rights: the right to respect, development, non-discrimination and one’s own identity.

A similar project from the area of intercultural education entitled “**The world in 36 frames**” supported the cause of integration between the Polish and Chechnyan children. This undertaking was directed at pupils from the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade of primary school, in which 42 Chechnyans learn. Polish as well as Chechnyan parents were further addressees, as their participation in the project was necessary in order to achieve its goals. This undertaking consisted of integration meetings, during which the children, as well as their parents, had an opportunity to get to know each other and the culture of their counterparts, as well as learn to respect their differences and to cooperate in spite of these. Children were given photo cameras and were asked to document their everyday existence for a number of days. The result was a photo exhibition during the International Refugee Day, in addition to using the photos as means of learning each other’s culture in the course of participation in activation games.

Another example is the “**Intercultural Warsaw**” project, realized between December 2009 and December 2012, is indirectly aimed at observing the rights of foreign children in a multicultural environment. This undertaking is divided into four parts. The first, “Legal consulting for foreigners”, covers a wide spectrum of problems which legal refugees, as well as individuals who are allowed

complementary protection or a tolerated residence permit may encounter. The second part, “Integration and multicultural consulting”, relates to multiple issues, stemming from the language barrier, as well as from the differences between nonverbal communication codes in the guest and host culture, which legal refugees, as well as refugees and migrants allowed complementary protection or a tolerated residence permit sometimes face (especially in the first period of their independent functioning in a new social, legal and cultural reality). These consultations have first and foremost a practical dimension. An Integration Adviser assists the foreigner in grasping the Polish reality and functions as an interpreter, an intercultural guide and, to some extent, also a social worker. He or she advises on ways of behaving in different social situations, connected with legal matters, finding a place to live, applying for a job, talking to babysitters, etc. They will also help with writing a formal application or a CV in Polish; additionally, they will, on request from the foreigner who does not feel comfortable with their knowledge of Polish is, act on his or her behalf during telephone conversations. Finally, if need arises, they will accompany the foreign individual in the capacity of a “multicultural interpreter” in the above situations. The presence of an Integration Adviser ensures that both the guests and the hosts have a better mutual understanding and lowers the risk of intercultural misunderstanding, in this way accelerating the process of integration. Intercultural and integration advice will be an element complementary to legal advice.

The multicultural-society phenomenon imposes a significant number of challenges on the contemporary system of education, in a situation where cultural and ethnic diversity of Polish children allows them to realize one of the basic children’s rights, the right to education about their rights. It is the most significant aspect and a task for both the state and the society. Education dilemmas of multicultural and ethnic societies still begin with the questions: what rights do the national and ethnic minority children have in the Polish system of education? In what way, in the Polish educational reality, is the right to education of these children observed? What rules and regulations are fitted to the present knowledge, taking into consideration social integration? Also, how does it reflect in educational and pedagogical practice? We need to find good answers and appropriate practical solutions...

I would like to finish my presentation with a brief outline of the idea of creating a “**Warsaw Multicultural Centre**” in the next few years – a place and space of multicultural integration for the locals and the foreigners. The aim of this institution is to help prevent the social marginalization and creation of ghettos (found for example in France, which resulted in the well – known riots on the outskirts of Paris), as well as counteracting the serious threats which the modern European metropolis faces, coming from a lack of knowledge concerning cultures, customs and the law. As an element of the educational activities undertaken in the Centre, classes and activities concerning the rights of children in education will take place. The Centre is to have a wide scale of functions, both in relation to the projects offered, as well as the addressee (migrants and refugees, Poles, tourists, different generations). The primary functions of the Centre are as follows:

- Activating – a nexus for immigrant initiatives, with offices of foreigner migrant/refugee support organizations and a space for meetings;
- Educational – including particular initiatives integrating the Polish children and youth with their immigrant counterparts, as well as children and youth from the minorities (including the rights education)
- Reception + Information point – assistance for every immigrant and refugee (without duplicating activities), information pertaining to the current multicultural offer in Warsaw, services directed at migrants and multicultural initiatives (e.g. walks, etc.)
- Cultural – cultural initiatives, exhibition and concert spaces, studios, workshops etc.



*Initiatives of Change*

- Research – modern, practical mini-centre for researching the dynamics of demographic change in Warsaw, from the angle of migration and needs analysis
- Documentation and presentation of the multicultural aspect of Warsaw.

The NGOs in Warsaw are very active in field of multicultural education, the most important problem is the lack of topics and activity's about children's rights in multiculturalism.

## **Conclusions**

The main conclusion stemming from my brief analysis is that there is still a significant amount of work to be done as the children's rights in multiculturalism education is concerned. The important fact is that we notice the necessity of such performing such actions and that we create spaces where children will have the ability to actively learn about their rights and to respect the rights of others, all in culturally diverse groups, as this constitutes the main rule of diversity pedagogy and of the respect for oneself and the culturally Other. However, the processes of achieving the knowledge of rights and cultural diversity by children must necessarily be accompanied by programs and projects of social integration directed at their parents. We must remember that "the children are not just the future of Humanity, but they are also its present".