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## TOWARDS PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE<sup>2</sup>: INTERCULTURAL NON-FORMAL EDUCATION ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN

### W STRONĘ POKOJOWEGO WSPÓLISTNIENIA – DZIAŁANIA Z ZAKRESU MIĘDZYKULTUROWEJ EDUKACJI NIEFORMALNEJ ADRESOWANE DO DZIECI

**Streszczenie:** Celem rozdziału jest przedstawienie opinii dzieci (w wieku 7 – 12 lat) na temat na treści działań z zakresu międzykulturowej edukacji nieformalnej realizowanej przez polskie organizacje pozarządowe (NGO). Badanie zostały przeprowadzone za pomocą nieustrukturyzowanych wywiadów z udziałem 65 osób. Wyniki badań pokazują, że międzykulturowa edukacja nieformalna dzięki swojej specyfice (aktywne uczenie się) tworzy szczególną przestrzeń dla rozwoju kompetencji międzykulturowych. Jej treści i metody są bardzo atrakcyjne z perspektywy dzieci. Można stwierdzić, że międzykulturowa edukacja nieformalna realizowana przez organizacje pozarządowe może stanowić inspirującą alternatywę dla klasycznych zajęć przedszkolnych i szkolnych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** treści międzykulturowej edukacji nieformalnej, organizacje pozarządowe, różnorodność kulturowa, dzieci

**Abstract:** The purpose of this chapter is to present the views of children aged 7 to 12 on the content of intercultural non-formal education activities carried out by Polish non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The study was conducted through unstructured interviews with 65 participants. The results of the research show that due to its character (active learning),

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intercultural non-formal education creates a special space for the developing intercultural competence. The content and methods employed in these activities are highly attractive and popular among children. It may be concluded that intercultural non-formal education carried out by NGOs offers an inspiring alternative to traditional kindergarten and school activities.

**Keywords:** intercultural non-formal education issues, non-governmental organisations, cultural diversity, children

## Introduction

In recent years, due a series of social processes, Poland's cultural structure has undergone intensified transformation, with implications that are visible at the educational level. Currently, the recipients of educational activities in Poland include not only members of the majority and the indigenous minority, as was the case in the past, but also new groups of migrants. In many Polish educational institutions, student groups now comprise individuals from various cultural, national, ethnic and religious backgrounds. As a result, new priorities have emerged that concern, among others, the integration of immigrants and refugees. In the era of civil society formation, the NGOs that undertake educational activities have gained increasing importance, becoming key players in some communities. Non-formal education and innovative teaching methods have 'entered' the schools, community centres, local clubs, and other settings. The programmes and projects pursued by NGOs adopt different forms of educational activities.

This chapter explores children's opinions regarding participation in the intercultural non-formal education. It presents the results of research on the perception of children aged 7 to 12 concerning the content of intercultural non-formal education activities carried out by Polish non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

## Theoretical Background and Assumptions of the Research

The theoretical core of the research project was provided by the assumptions of the concept of non-formal education and the Holistic Concept of Intercultural Education by Jerzy Nikitorowicz (2005). During the research design, reference was made to results on the development of social attitudes among children, the literature showing the relationship between culture and education, and the definition of intercultural competence.

Education can be seen as a crucial factor in the formation of identity, social attitudes and preparation for life in culturally diverse societies. According to the assumptions of the Holistic Intercultural Education Concept (HIEC) by J. Nikitorowicz (2005), intercultural education is a process that involves a series of actions, both intentional and institutional, as well as spontaneous ones.

The primary goal of intercultural education is to develop intercultural competence. In a metaphorical and holistic sense, this type of competence is defined by Sławomir Magala. According to the researcher, intercultural competence can be compared to a backpack or a set of tools that all learners assemble on their own when they have to deal with different cultural software in one place (Magala 2011). Therefore, intercultural competence can be defined as the ability to communicate and interact with people from different cultures based on an understanding of their perception of the world.

Intercultural education is a lifelong process, so it is reasonable to discuss intercultural formal (school), non-formal (not connected with school) and spontaneous education, which inter-permeate and complement one another (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska 2015).

Intercultural non-formal education creates a unique space for preparing people to function in an intercultural environment. This form of education is understood as a planned process of acquiring intercultural competence, due to its specific nature (learning by doing, using innovative methods of work, voluntary participation, etc.). Intercultural non-formal education can be viewed as experimental and innovative, responding to emerging learning needs as society evolves, developing human capabilities, improving social cohesion and creating responsible citizens (cf. UNESCO 2014).

Research shows that by the age of three, children already develop a simplified and negative image of older people. Over time, stereotypes and prejudices about various social groups (national, ethnic, linguistic) begin to form. The period between the ages of four and seven is when children develop the ability to perceive other races and ethnic groups (Weigl 1999). This makes it good time to introduce this subject in educational programs (Wygotski 2002). Research on youth attitudes towards differences indicate that participants in activities aimed at raising awareness of differences exhibit lower levels of social distance towards Others compared to those who did not engage in such educational activities (Jasińska-Kania & Staszyńska 2009). Therefore, it is important to progressively develop a sensitivity towards difference from early childhood. Starting with the child's biological perception (e.g. physical fitness, age, skin colour), the sensitivity gradually evolved into a cultural identity related to both the local environment and the diverse cultures present around the world.

The Ministry of National Education is responsible for intercultural education in Polish schools. In recent years, a significant document in the context of preparing children to function in a culturally diverse societies has been the Regulation of the Ministry of National Education of 27 August 2012, on the core curriculum and general education in particular types of schools. This regulation includes clauses that obligate individual institutions to pursue intercultural education on various levels. However, research (Januszewska & Markowska-Manista 2017, Kubin & Świerszcz, 2014, Muciuś, Olender & Sokołowski, et al. 2015) and personal observations related

to working in culturally diverse environment show that, in practice, the issues addressed in kindergartens and schools are neither extensive nor congeneric, and the educational initiatives have an incidental and superficial character. NGOs frequently complement the formal education activities of institutions in this field.

### **Outline of the Research Methodology**

#### Subject

The research was based on the opinions of primary school children regarding the content of cyclical intercultural non-formal education activities undertaken by NGOs in Poland. The study classifies the vast majority of entities that registered activity in the area of education and upbringing, culture and art, integration and social activation, and human rights, and it assumes the realisation of the idea of intercultural education.

The study involved initiatives aimed at achieving the following objectives: the development of intercultural competence that enables individuals to manage relations with Strangers and Others in the cultural dimension and to establish partnerships with them; and forming individual identity while raising awareness of indigenous values as well as European and universal ones. These objectives were pursued through regular educational workshops, multifaceted educational projects and competitions that included various social groups. The initiatives were based on direct participation, and assumed the cooperation of educational entities at the local, regional, national and transnational levels.

#### Research method

The unstructured interview method was used to obtain the opinions of children regarding NGO initiatives. This approach allowed to conduct free conversations with children, to follow their way of thinking and describing reality and to capture all of the important threads appearing during interviews.

The adopted perspective for this data collection aligns with the assumptions of phenomenology, which places the description of the human experience at the centre (Ablewicz 2010). The children's comments were treated as the phenomena of their learning experiences, representing an individual production and interpretation of their educational reality, focusing on what each child deemed most important.

#### Study group

The selection of participants in the field of intercultural non-formal education, carried out by foundations and associations operating in Poland, was deliberate and

incidental. Two factors were taken into consideration while selecting the participants for the research: age and the criterion of direct participation in ongoing initiatives. 65 children, aged 7 to 12, who participated in initiatives implemented by Polish NGOs, took part in this study. This age range was chosen because it is a crucial period in the process of forming social attitudes. The groups of children who participated in the study were diverse, including students from the majority group, national minorities, a group of immigrants and refugees. They differed in social and economic status, had a range of life experiences (e.g. immigrant and refugee backgrounds) and varied school situations (e.g. education in two or more educational systems). Due to the diversity of the study group, the children were to be sure that theoretical saturation (Charmaz 2014) had been achieved.

In the study group there were 40 girls and 25 boys; 46 of the children were up to 9 years old and 19 were between 10 and 12 years old. Among the participants, 57 were of Polish nationality, holding Polish citizenship, while 8 children of non-Polish nationality (mainly Chechen, Belarussian and Ukrainian). The interviews were conducted across various locations in Poland, including Białystok, Poznań, and Warsaw, and took place in a variety of settings (NGO offices, schools, cultural institutions, etc.).

### **Children's Opinions on Content of Intercultural Non-formal Education**

From the Diversity of Our Own Backyard to the Diversity of Distant Parts of the World

The children involved in various types of NGOs' initiatives were asked about the subject of activities and expressed a variety of thoughts, including:

„It was about other people, different countries, clothes and holidays”, „Our teacher showed us how different people from different parts of the world could look and their lifestyles”, „We talked about what it is like to move in a wheelchair and which problems are faced by disabled people”, „We learned how to help other children”.

The content analysis of the children's expressions indicates that intercultural non-formal education activities addressed topics concerning both issues of non-ethnic diversity (e.g., age, physical condition) and ethnic diversity (e.g., specificity of cultural and religious background) (comp. Gęsiak 2007). The analysis identified the following thematic areas of intercultural non-formal education: psychophysical human functioning, economic and social status, cultural diversity of the local environment and country of residence, and cultural specificity of selected areas and countries. The content of NGOs' initiatives was complementary to the holistic understanding of intercultural education (Nikitorowicz 2005). Based on the analysis

of the content of the children's statements, specific content of individual initiatives of NGOs were taken into account (differentiation criterion).

In many children's statements about the scope and content of intercultural non-formal education activities of Polish NGOs, there was evidence of the innovative character of the programmes. The children pointed out that the analysed issues went beyond compulsory education programs, focusing on so-called "human matters" – related to the functioning in the conditions of an individual such as economic, social and cultural differences. The participants in the study stated that these issues were significantly different from those undertaken in the course of formal education (school subjects, e.g. Polish and Mathematics).

We didn't learn how to count or do Mathematics, but about the difference, how not to be a person who doesn't like others because they are different. I think it is necessary, because some people think that if someone is different from them, then it is not necessary to like and respect him.

Such observations made by the children may be due to the fact that issues in the field of intercultural education are related to current socio-cultural problems rather than the content that is usually associated with school curricula. Most of the activities that the children commented on were initiatives implemented in schools by NGOs. According to the Regulation of the Ministry of National Education of 27 August 2012 on the core curriculum and general education, content of intercultural education should be undertaken within the course of formal education. The specific sense of 'novelty' regarding the discussed issues, as perceived by the youngest recipients of NGO actions, may result from the cyclical implementation of these educational activities over the same period of time.

A large percentage of the children participating in the study, commented on the specifics of the content of intercultural non-formal education carried out by Polish NGOs. This indicated that the topics discussed during the course were noteworthy. The children described the issues raised using the following terms most frequently: *cool, interesting, not boring, wise*.

[...] I will remember this project for a long time. What we were talking about at our meetings was really interesting, and I liked it. Lessons about other cultures; meetings with different people, where we could talk in English; the lessons where you were telling us about the problems of different people. It's nice that something like that happened to us. I was waiting for these lessons, and I was not bored.

It can be concluded that the children's interest in issues raised during the activities of Polish NGOs results from their different scope of these topics compared to the content provided as a part of obligatory education, and the non-compulsory

school character (including no grading) of their implementation. It is worth noting that according to the children's opinions, interesting classes included those that focused on pleasant topics, especially those that did not evoke complex emotions (e.g. cultural diversity of their local environment, their homeland and far-away countries). However, the children were also engaged by classes that addressed complicated social problems, which required significant cognitive effort, reflective thinking and even in some cases associated with a certain psychological cost.

#### With Others and about Others

In many statements made by the children who participated in the Polish NGOs' activities, it was clear that a key aspect of learning was the multiplicity of educational activities and working methods. The activities most frequently mentioned by children included art works, physical and musical activities, and fairy tales.

The teachers always had something interesting. There was not a single boring lesson when the teachers were just writing on the blackboard. We did various artworks, there was a fairy tale on each topic, and this story brought us closer to the situation. We not only learn at the moment when someone does the tasks, but also with the help of fun. It was different than every day.

The children indicated that during the activities organised by NGOs, they worked in a different way than they did on a daily basis. This difference may be attributed to the fact that the applied activities, to a greater or lesser extent, differed from the everyday activities related to the routine implementation of the content provided for in the school programmes and textbooks.

The variety of educational activities and working methods provided children with the opportunity to actively engage with the issues analysed, to interact and play. The participants in these activities had the opportunity to learn thanks to the involvement of various spheres of activity (cognitive, emotional and physical). These activities encouraged active participation in classes and provided a platform for developing full and integrated social attitudes (Böhner & Wänke 2004). The content of children's statements indicates that many of the activities and methods used were new (e.g. using psychoeducational fairy tales, some selected art techniques; work based on a song).

According to the children's opinions, a significant aspect of learning during the activities and the analysis of the content of intercultural non-formal education was the opportunity to talk, dialogue and share their own experiences (including topics related to the cultural identity of children).

There we talked about the customs; we could talk about our habits [...]. The Chechen boys from our class told us about their customs, we could learn about them, it was fun. I really liked it.

According to the participants, conversations, dialogues and the sharing of their own experiences were elements that enabled them to freely express their opinions regarding their self-knowledge, personal experience, and the inclusion of minorities in the educational process (including children with experience of migration). Children noted the fact that the analysis of the specific issues often began with the presentation of their own experience (e.g. through conversation), making it deeper and more complex. It is important to mention that in this context the children belonging to ethnic minorities, as well as immigrants and refugees, had the opportunity to talk about their national culture and religion in an open manner, without coercion and in accordance with their cultural abilities. Including the specific cultural affiliations of minority children in the educational process is crucial for the development of their cultural identity and self-esteem (Nikitorowicz 2005, 2009). This approach also promotes equal treatment. However, as practice shows, this is not a commonly adopted approach in formal education. When this potential is neglected, it can lead to a sense of inferiority of culturally different children compared with the majority of the group (Nikitorowicz 2017).

The youngest participants in intercultural non-formal education indicated that an important element of training during the activities of NGOs was working in non-traditional classroom settings (i.e., on the carpet, in a circle and in other configurations).

[...] It was cool if you are not sitting at a school desk. A person has a problem and learns with others. You can learn a lot. I would like to see the lessons organised in the following way – once we are in a circle and once in any other way.

The children participating in intercultural non-formal education noted that working away from the school desks (on the floor) increased not only the attractiveness of learning, but also promoted the efficiency of content implementation. According to the surveyed children, stepping out from „behind the school desk” and accepting a freer posture provided a sense of relaxation, supported free thinking and action, and ultimately made the learning process more effective.

The children indicated that the group work was a big advantage as a method of content analysis of intercultural non-formal education in the classroom.

[...] I really liked the way we worked in groups, because everyone had different ideas, and from these different ideas one good thing could be created. Sitting on the carpet, we were collecting ideas for the creation of works.



According to the children, group work enhanced both the attractiveness of the class activities and the effectiveness of training. The content of children's statements indicated that the attractiveness and efficiency of work in the group were crucial factors. Among other benefits, it increased the possibility of using the ideas of all its members and bringing them together, mutual support, and efficient performance of the tasks undertaken. The characteristics of group work mentioned by children indicated the existence of positive interdependence in the course of work on a specific task, which is an important feature of collaborative learning. From the perspective of intercultural non-formal education, this form of work is particularly important because it is a way to create space for intercultural reflection and meetings. It encourages intercultural dialogue and cross-cultural communication. The results of group work, based on positive interdependence, are typically more effective than those achieved by individuals working alone (Okoń 2003).

The children participating in intercultural non-formal education often pointed out that an important element of learning about issues related to the socio-cultural diversity of the world was the positive atmosphere that prevailed during educational activities.

Everyone was learning, having fun, it was fun, we were doing it together, and there were various fun games [...]. We did it together; we were not separated from friends. The teachers understood us. Nobody laughed at us.

The content of the statements of the youngest participants in intercultural non-formal education indicated that a positive atmosphere based on kindness prevailed during the implemented initiatives and led to a psychological sense of security. This, in turn, was reflected in community building and the attractiveness of learning whilst simultaneously strengthening the effectiveness of work. It also motivated children belonging to minorities to open up to Others.

The children also noticed that during the intercultural non-formal education they had an opportunity to learn through play.

[...] It was pretty cool – better than a normal lesson. Then you can play in groups, but in lesson you have to think a lot and you are getting tired. We also learn then.

The children observed that games had great educational potential, whilst being free and enjoyable activities. The possibility of learning through playing was often noticed by children under the age of 9 compared to those in the age range of 10 – 12 years. It can be attributed to the specific development of young children, who associate fun with experiencing positive emotions, pleasure, joy and satisfaction (Waloszek 2009). It should be noted, however, that regardless

of the differences in age, children experienced the fun of social competence in the sense of the ability to act „with something” or „with someone”, the possibility of “taking from someone and giving to someone”, and „receiving from someone”. They also experienced the effects of social behaviour. They built an important part of their self-image in the form of social subjectivity. The games allowed them to acquire a positive social attitude towards themselves, other people and their lives (Waloszek 2009). The statements of many children indicated that various didactic aids enriched the learning process.

The teachers brought different things, such as keys, and we randomly draw lots. It was very cool – we studied different things in a different way.

Considering the content of children’s statements, the use of a variety of didactic aids was a way of enriching the lessons of intercultural non-formal education. Multimedia equipment (laptops, multimedia boards, etc.) and a wide range of teaching materials (photos, subjects regarding different cultures, puppets, etc.) were used to carry out several activities. Using a wide variety of educational tools during educational initiatives is an important factor in teaching children about differences. In the case of the youngest recipients of intercultural education, sensitisation to Others should be initiated through cultural „artefacts” (objects), not just through direct contact with Others, and/or foreign people (especially adults). The contact “child – artefact” does not threaten their security. This type of relationship makes it easier to move from curiosity to cognition and further understanding (Kamińska 2005). Therefore, a child is cognitively and emotionally prepared to establish relationships with people who differ from children in different spheres. Ultimately, the use of various didactic tools increased the efficiency of content delivery (e.g., by visualising some problems) and increased their attractiveness (the ability to experience problems analysed through interaction with artefacts).

A backpack full of socially useful competences

The information contained in the overwhelming majority of children’s statements suggests that participation in intercultural non-formal education activities promoted children’s acquisition of knowledge and increased awareness of the problems analysed during individual educational events. According to the opinions of the youngest recipients, the knowledge they acquired concerned the following issues: cultures of national and ethnic minorities; people with migration experience; distant cultures; the right of every human being to be Different; the need to treat all people equally regardless of the differences; and interpersonal and intercultural differences.

I could learn about other cultures: Chinese, Romanian. I could also learn that you do not have to make fun of Others and you have to accept any person as he is.

A large group of the children indicated that by learning about the situation of people from different backgrounds (immigrants, refugees, people with different economic status, etc.) and by considering the experience and realities of their peers' lives, children's sensitivity could be developed for the problems of Strangers and Others and the need for their support.

[...] I've learned that you have to play with children who are different, because you can get to know them better. Now I understand the feelings of aliens. I've learned that you have to help aliens that you do not have to turn away from them. For example, if someone is really from another country, then you have to help him/her.

In the statements of a slightly smaller group of children who participated in intercultural non-formal education conducted by Polish NGOs, information appeared indicating that they had acquired new skills. The analysis of the content of the children's statements shows that the acquired skills included positive behaviours in relations with Strangers and Others (including their peers), ways of supporting Strangers and Others, as well as certain elements of the analysed cultures (e.g., national dances) and languages (e.g., basics of speaking, writing, dancing).

[...] You have to treat them as usual, just like everyone else and it is no matter if he is fat or thin, it is important to treat them normally, just like every child – just in normal way. Moreover, it is not nice to laugh at the fact that someone is from a different country, it is good to treat them normally, just like you treat other people in Poland. I will be able to do it.

Analysing the complexity of knowledge, awareness, sensitivity and skills indicated by children, it can be noted that their participation in intercultural non-formal education enabled them to acquire selected elements of intercultural competence. In this context, the competence can be compared with Sławomir Magala's (2011) metaphor – a backpack or a set of tools needed to navigate the cultural differences that people experience in different educational situations. Undoubtedly, through participating in methodically planned learning situations, as well as through the process of spontaneous learning with Strangers and Others, the children, each in their own way, gathered the tools necessary to work in conditions of difference.

According to the opinions of children participating in intercultural non-formal education, the initiatives of NGOs contributed most significantly to the acquisition

of knowledge/awareness of the diversity of their environment. They led to the development of sensitivity to diversity and the acquisition of certain skills to a lesser extent. In the case of the analysed initiatives the children acquired primarily useful social knowledge/awareness. Considering the objectives of intercultural education of children in many kindergartens and preschool institutions, the most important goal is the development of cognitive curiosity and the awareness that people differ from each other in some respects and that they have the right to do so (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska 2011).

The content of the statements of a large group of children indicated that they were aware of the social usefulness of intercultural non-formal education activities carried out by Polish NGOs. In their views, the issues discussed were useful in the process of formal education, peer relations, and social functioning.

We need to know more about other cultures and other people. We have learned that if someone is different, it does not mean that he or she is bad. You cannot immediately evaluate him/her, say, for example, that if you wear glasses, you are no worse, because we are all equal. And can meet various people in our life. You have to play with Others, because you can learn something new from them, buddy up and make friends [...].

The sense of social usefulness regarding the topics addressed may be attributed to their focus on the sociocultural aspects of human functioning, particularly for children, in various environments (at home, at school, in the peer group, in the yard, etc.), and sociocultural situations and processes (immigration, exile, acculturation, etc.).

### **Conclusion**

The research indicates that the content of intercultural non-formal education activities organised by Polish NGOs for groups of children corresponded to its holistic understanding. By addressing issues related to various aspects of sociocultural human functioning, these initiatives differed significantly from the topics typically covered in everyday school education, thus capturing the children's interest. The foundation of intercultural non-formal education was active participation employing a variety of methods and forms of work that were appealing to children. It constituted an element of intercultural competence: knowledge/awareness of world diversity, development of sensitivity to differences, and skills necessary to function in different conditions. The children's opinions and statements show that the content of NGO initiatives was an important training ground for operating in the conditions of difference and building peaceful coexistence. These initiatives complemented the issues covered during formal education, encouraging for reflection and active participation in activities that are often lacking in formal

education. Given the ongoing sociocultural changes, it is difficult to disagree with the recommendation of the Council of Europe (2000), which states that the formal education system cannot meet the challenges of modern society. Formal education should be supported by the non-formal education system, since it is an integral part of lifelong learning.

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