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NON-CONTEXTUAL TEACHING OF SENSITIVE TOPICS FOCUSING ON CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN POLISH SCHOOLS

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Keywords: non-contextual teaching, sensitive topics, cultural diversity in Polish schools, decolonisation.

The aim of this article is to capture the specifics and validity of non-contextual teaching of sensitive topics focusing on the increasing cultural diversity in Polish schools. The term 'non-contextual teaching' refers to teaching about cultural diversity in schools which were non-diverse for a long period of time, but are becoming increasingly culturally diverse. On the one hand, the paper looks at school asymmetries related to school curricula. On the other hand, it describes the needs of diverse groups of students and teachers connected with the decolonisation of educational content in the increasingly diversified world. Due to the limited space available in the paper, the article is only an attempt at signalling certain issues important for the subject at hand that can be a point of departure for further analysis and reflection about the necessity to decolonise school curricula.

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BEZKONTEKSTOWE NAUCZANIE TEMATÓW DRAŻLIWYCH Z UWZGLĘDNIENIEM RÓŻNORODNOŚCI KULTUROWEJ W POLSKICH SZKOŁACH

Słowa kluczowe: nauczanie bezkontekstowe, tematy drażliwe, różnorodność kulturowa w polskich szkołach, dekolonizacja.

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest uchwycenie specyfiki i zasadności bezkontekstowego nauczania tematów drażliwych z uwzględnieniem rosnącej różnorodności kulturowej w polskich szkołach. Termin „nauczanie bezkontekstowe” oznacza naukę o różnorodności kulturowej w szkołach, które przez długi czas nie były, ale z czasem stają się coraz bardziej kulturowo zróżnicowane. Z jednej strony, artykuł poświęcony jest asymetrii szkolnej związanej z programami nauczania. Z drugiej opisuje potrzeby zróżnicowanych grup uczniów i nauczycieli związane z dekolonizacją treści edukacyjnych w coraz bardziej zróżnicowanym świecie. Ze względu na ograniczoną ilość miejsca artykuł jest jedynie próbą zasygnalizowania pewnych istotnych dla omawianego tematu kwestii, które mogą stanowić punkt wyjścia do dalszych analiz i refleksji nad koniecznością dekolonizacji szkolnych programów nauczania.

Introduction

I decided to address this subject in view of my long-term experience in research on education for diversity and intercultural education (Dąbrowa, Markowska-Manista 2009; Markowska-Manista 2016), training of teachers to work in multicultural classrooms and on the functioning of students from diverse cultural background in Polish schools. Another impetus came from the course: *Working with children from culturally and socially diverse backgrounds* I teach to pedagogy students at the University of Warsaw as well as participation in an international European Union project: *Sensiclass: tackling sensitive topics in a classroom*¹. The idea for the project was born as a response to changes taking place in Central and Eastern European countries, including the internationalisation of higher education institutions (increased international mobility) on the one hand, and narrations present in the public space about issues perceived as controversial or sensitive due

¹The Project is implemented by four universities from Central and Eastern Europe: Tartu Ulikoo, Estonia, SGH Warsaw School of Economics (SGH), Poland Univerzita Hrades Králové, Czech Republic and Közép-Európai Egyetem, Hungary.

to their being foreign, new, contextualised, unfamiliar and at times socially and culturally tabooed, on the other hand.

I also address the absence of or ignoring these issues in the formal education of students. The costs of these gaps and negligence can be seen, as Rudnicki writes, “when one must speak about important matters, of consequence to the entire society” (2018, p. 56). These issues include, for instance, the experience of racism (Balogun, Joseph-Salisbury 2020) of young Polish black girls (Piekarska 2020), who point to the oppressive, discriminatory and racist context of school education and discourse in which they grew up and learnt² (see the campaign DontCallMeMurzyn 2020). The third important incentive to write this article is my participation in postcolonial research on education, childhood and children’s rights fitting into a decolonial trend (Liebel 2020, Markowska-Manista 2020, Vandenhole 2020), indicating how much there is to do in this area both within the academia and school practice. A decolonial approach requires substantial effort in breaking apparently (frequently stereotypical) self-evident truths, formulaic patterns in education (Viruru 2005), fossilised forms of teaching or thought habits determining didactic strategies and points of view on migration and cultural diversification of schools. It involves redefining and reconceptualising the present paradigms and social categories. It also means taking a critical look at the nationcentric school culture and its educational offer “fitted into school curricula and the canon of required reading” (Janus-Sitarz 2020). These reflections are provoked, for instance, by a new phenomenon observed by Górak-Sosnowska in Polish schools during ‘Days of nations’ or ‘International days’. Originally, these school events were designed as a tool for learning about other cultures and arousing students’ interest in diversity. Several years ago, practically all classes naturally chose other nations and presented the elements of their culture through clothing, art or cuisine. Today, as Górak-Sosnowska argues, we can witness an unprecedented turn towards one’s own culture: students taking part in these events increasingly tend to choose and represent Polish national culture (see: Górak-Sosnowska, Sozańska 2020). At times, as the scholars point out, several classes compete to be able to represent this country within this presumably ‘international’ school event.

The aim of this article is to look at Polish culturally non-diversified mass schools of the last decade and the theoretical, non-contextual teaching

² *The odd-looking fellow: An auto ethnographic narrative on identity and exclusion of the Zimbabwean child in the diaspora in Poland*, presented by Shepherd Mutsvara at the conference: *Local dimension of children’s migrations and its impact on EU integration policy*, online 2020, serves as another example.

of sensitive topics taking place within their walls. I want to explore them through the prism of their mutually contradictory nature. I will outline the context of teaching I call non-contextual (Januszewska, Markowska-Manista 2017) which is understood here as teaching about diversity in a non-diverse school. This refers to the fact that teaching about the inhabitants of other countries and their cultures in a monocultural school attended only by Polish students differs significantly from teaching about diversity in a culturally diverse school. It involves both the possibility to confront the facts taught and ways of teaching. Importantly, it also refers to being aware of the presence of students representing different cultures and nationalities in one's classroom. I will also analyse the teaching of sensitive topics connected with cultural diversity, racism and migration from two perspectives. One perspective involves teaching and learning respect for another human being at school as an institution located in culture, while the second – at school as an organisation in which we deal with the complexity and multidimensionality of school culture (Czerpaniak-Walczak 2015, p. 81), in other words, the permeation of multiple cultural worlds. This triggers a need to reflect on teaching in an increasingly culturally diverse school. It generates a necessity to think about education in a systemic way, as a phenomenon recognising not only transformations and challenges, but also the presence and needs of diverse groups of students and teachers (Grzybowski 2011) connected with the decolonisation of educational content in the increasingly diversified world (Markowska-Manista 2020).

School asymmetries

Since Poland entered the EU, there has been a growing number of foreigners and Poles participating in the processes of long-term and short-term migration, including return migration after often long periods of living abroad (see: Anczyk et al. 2019). There is also an increasing number of children and adolescents born in bicultural families and families with migration background who have received Polish citizenship and whose children were born in Poland. An awareness of the growing diversity resulting from economic mobility and migration and implying diverse intercultural educational relations necessitates that everyone perceives their expectations, challenges and duties as elements of the school space treated as a coherent, dynamic whole. It is very important since, as results from literature on the subject, the Polish school is usually a source of negative experiences for students (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2013). It is increasingly a space for illusory activities (Dudzikowa 2013) as defective education “primarily harms all children from disadvantaged backgrounds” (Piotrowski and

Piotrowska 2016, p. 269) and children from diverse cultural backgrounds, perceived by teachers as a problem (Markowska-Manista 2016). This in turn influences the creation of the school climate, i.e. relations and contact between school staff, students and parents, as well as relations among students and their sense (or lack thereof) of connection with the school. It also consequently provokes us to reimagine school as a place and space of comprehensive development for all students (Dudzikowa 2004). In this context, it seems necessary to investigate external phenomena and processes that locate school in the space of contradictions relating to external political, economic, social and educational mechanisms (see: Dudzikowa, Bochno 2016). School is an aggregate of certain values, traditions, aspirations, beliefs, and attitudes which define its essence and simultaneously decide about its internal social and cultural climate. At the same time, school does not exist in a vacuum as it is created by adults and children from various social and cultural backgrounds, with various experiences, expectations and beliefs. All these factors impact the conditions and relations present in the space of the contemporary school and point to numerous school asymmetries as a place of acquiring and transmitting knowledge as well as participating and being in relation with others. What is more, they affect the positive and negative experiences resulting from the explicit and implicit school curriculum, the teaching content as well as words and images in which this daily content fits into “teaching life in a world full of differences” (Janion 1982, p. 124).

For many years, the Polish education system functioned with no need to confront multiculturalism and intercultural relations resulting from the process of increasing migration from non-European countries (particularly former colonies). This Polish post-war ‘homogeneity’ is, to use Zubrzycki’s words, a “product of recent, and very violent, historical events and political processes” (Zubrzycki 2016, p. 73-74). As Popow (2015, p. 114) writes, in Poland “both, East and West are rejected and desired. It may be assumed that they play the role of the Other”. Decades of teaching in nationally non-diverse classrooms, anchored in the construction of national identity, have built a pattern in which fragmentary knowledge about Others, which distances and strengthens the opposition between “Us” and “Them”. The transmission of this knowledge is based on reading lists, texts in textbooks and fiction (Moskalewicz 2005, Zamojska 2012) which, to give an example, reproduce stereotypical images of Others aggravated by orientalist, discriminatory narrations in media discourse about Out-groups while referring to colonial content and lacking a reliable educational commentary. For several decades, this educational content

has also been strengthened by the Eurocentric civilising mission hidden under the masks of ‘humanitarianism’, protection of ‘human rights’ and ‘the promotion of democracy’. This mission fits into the ideas of NGO projects and church missions implemented in countries of the Global South which receive developmental and humanitarian support from Poland. The majority of these projects include an element of global education fitting into civic education and aiming to sensitise Polish students to problems of the globalised world, particularly to global co-dependencies. What does the implementation of this type of content and reliable teaching (reflecting the reality and the context) to sensitise students to the situation of others in an average Polish school look like? Unfortunately, it does not seem so easy. Kuleta-Hulboj argues that the dominant political discourse presses curricula to emphasise national culture and values, accentuating Polish martyrdom and heroism, which marks a turn towards a constrained view of national identity and citizenship (2020, p. 18).

A question must be asked here: does an incidental, non-contextual meeting with sensitive topics about Others in the school classroom based on the postulates of global education but implemented under political pressure, “at the service of an ideology”, really break the charm of the monocultural, Polish-centric³ context of teaching? Secondly, does this non-contextual teaching break the accepted patterns and build the students’ cultural reflexivity? And thirdly, does it consider the presence of diverse Polish students, e.g. black Polish citizens, in educational practices which do not discriminate and which decolonise racism hidden in neutrally treated school reading lists? There is no research done in this area. We only know that every school has to deal with the problem by itself. It frequently does it ‘in the dark’, to the degree it can and wants (populist, nationalist, or neoliberal discourse), using both colonial and postcolonial lens to describe and explain sensitive topics in relation to the increasingly diverse Polish reality.

The second crucial element of this educational transmission involves teachers’ preparation and attitudes as well as their ways of teaching cultural values and stances through the prism of the content presented in the process of education. It is particularly visible with reference to the work of teachers, taking place in unique conditions of particular schools situated in particular contexts. It is impacted by many interrelated factors and the teachers themselves with their cultural scripts, baggage of experience and approaches to teaching and the world in general. The changeability of subjects and teacher-student relations, the situations they find themselves in, the context

³Polish-centrism is defined as “the everyday biological practices that constantly reproduce the differences between ‘them’ and ‘us.’” (Balogun 2020, p. 1208).

of the classroom, school, more distant and closer surroundings – all of these create unique combinations (Kwaśnica 2007) for which pedagogical theory (as a generalisation) serves as an explanation rather as a means of planning and implementation of activities (Kwiatkowska 2008, p. 107). The challenge also lies in the communicative nature of the teacher's work, meaning that the teacher impacts the student (while also being influenced by the student), both through conscious (intentional and unintentional) actions as well as actions and worldview whose impact they are unaware of. The influence can also occur through the teacher's intercultural experiences or lack thereof. This means that he or she can never fully anticipate the effects of these mutual influences, much less plan them (Kwaśnica 2007). As Kwiatkowska (1997) argues, since pedagogical situations cannot be fully anticipated, there is no set of knowledge to be readily applied by the teacher in every pedagogical circumstance, leaving him or her to assess it individually and act accordingly based on self-created principles and norms. The very nature of pedagogical activity is an interdisciplinary endeavour based on a reflexive approach towards oneself, the student (and other links of this process) as well as reality understood both as a context and the object of educational influence, while the aims and means used to achieve them do not fit into technical rationality⁴.

On the other hand, the complexity of issues fitting into sensitive topics and the complicated nature of some of these issues generate an additional challenge in bridging the gap between both spheres – theory and practice. “Teachers impact students with each gesture and word, each behaviour, through who they are as people, through how they understand others and themselves, through how they approach students, themselves and the knowledge they transmit” (Kwaśnica 2007, p. 269). As a result, their stereotypes and prejudices (particularly dangerous if unrealised) block the readiness to address the subjects (or their elements) functioning within global education, or they can deeply distort the content. If the teacher holds one ‘correct’ worldview (versus cultural relativism promoted by intercultural and global education) or strong ethnic/nationalistic stereotypes, these features can obstruct an objective transmission of the content. The same

⁴Technical rationality assumes that if we know what aims we want to achieve, it is easy to determine the means used to achieve them. This cannot be said about the situation of education, in which case a number of factors (including those the teacher is not aware of and cannot control, some of which are connected with his or her personality and actions, while others go beyond the impact of the teacher and the school or are connected with the specific nature of the object towards which educational activity is undertaken) influence the final effect (concrete changes in the area of knowledge, skills and attitudes).

impediment may arise out of the teacher's fear of addressing 'difficult' or 'problematic' subjects.

Contexts of non-contextual teaching

As a result of its central European location and membership in the EU, Poland is frequently treated as a transit country by migrants from Eastern to Western Europe. It is rarely chosen as a final destination, albeit a certain number of immigrants from former Soviet states (Ukraine, Belarus), and the Caucasus, and a much smaller number of immigrants from the Arab Peninsula, African continent or Latin America do decide to settle in the country. Still, refugees and migrants deciding to live in Poland constitute a small fraction of the country's population of 38 million. Little diversity in terms of nationality and years of eastern cultural isolation have caused that knowledge about foreigners living in Poland is fragmentary among Poles. Relative to old EU states, Poland has very limited experience of preparing teachers and pedagogues to work with foreign students (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska 2017) and teach in culturally diverse classrooms. This fact is important, bearing in mind the growing cultural diversity at schools both in the local context – increasing economic and education-motivated migration from neighbouring countries (Ukraine and Belarus), and the global context connected with mobility among Poles and international migration movements (Glinka, Jelonek 2020; de Haas et al. 2020).

Against the background of many other EU states, Polish schools have a small number of students with diverse cultural backgrounds. Making up only a few percent of the population, migrants are hardly visible in the public sphere. On the other hand, in recent years this group has been exposed in the media for political reasons, exacerbating barriers, prejudice and fear of foreigners (Pasamonik 2017). At the beginning of the school year 2019/2020, 57,717 students from diverse cultural backgrounds attended Polish schools (see: System Informacji Oświatowej 2020). With the exception of national and ethnic minorities, individuals from various cultural backgrounds have been historically absent from the Polish society. Moreover, there has been no strategy of cultural opening to migrants connected with the so-called global 'migration crisis' in recent years (Bhabha 2018). This had several consequences, including the perpetuation of many stereotypes and the absence of curricula promoting cultural diversity. School curricula and educational projects did not incorporate topics or activities oriented towards opening schools to diversity and intercultural communication and promoting the right to non-discrimination

for all students and educators. Polish monocultural schools also lack a strategy for teaching cultural competences which are a prerequisite for successful co-existence in the multicultural world (Markowska-Manista, Dąbrowa 2016). There is a shortage of up-to-date studies identifying the needs and activities of teachers working in culturally diverse schools with students from various cultural backgrounds, with diverse cultural contexts, conducted through the perspective of multiculturalism. Undoubtedly, there is a correlation between this situation and the fact that the majority of migrants did not treat Poland as their destination: the teachers' knowledge, intercultural needs and competences in this area were as a result treated as marginal. In 2007, Gmaj and Iglicka commented that the challenges connected with teaching foreign students in Poland appeared as a future concern. After thirteen years, when migration movements are increasing in Europe affecting also Polish schools, students, teachers and teaching, these words return like an echo. They make us look at one more important piece of this puzzle. It refers to culturally and nationally diverse families, particularly black Poles and their children who, despite being born in Poland, raised in the Polish culture and identifying with Poland as their home country, are treated through the prism of Polish-centrism (Balogun 2020) as foreign and antithetical to the images of typical Poles or 'not quite Poles'.

Sensitive topics in non-contextual teaching

The category of sensitive topics is not new in school education. It can include issues, subjects or problems that can be a source of differences in opinions and worldviews. It can include topics which may have a political, cultural, social, environmental or personal influence on the students and/or the society. They frequently cannot produce easy answers, partly because the solutions can be based on individual, personal values and beliefs. Until now, global education was one of the spaces for the teaching of sensitive topics in Polish schools. Being implemented in practice (in its various forms), it admittedly perceives global contexts and promotes integrated thinking, but it is also a colonising education (Omolo 2020). It means that politicised documents and practices form the fundamentals of its teaching, while the Global North- Global South dichotomy it emphasises, instead of eliminating differences, perpetuates the division of the world into privileged donors and subordinate recipients of support. This process is amplified, for instance, through literature for children and youth portraying a broader background of the historical marginalisation and exotisation of Africa and its constant representations as a subordinate continent (see: *Bambo Brown, King Matt*

the 1st, In desert and wilderness, Tom's adventures on the Black Continent).

Hence global education (on the level of the aforementioned documents, stereotypes held by teachers, etc.) can promote Eurocentric thinking and stereotypical representations of cultural and social diversity and global interdependencies. Not allowing the others we teach about to speak (Spivak 1988), failing to refer to their narrations and publications (Pietrusińska 2020), through their context and their perspectives on the subject we teach, we participate in the reproduction of one-sided, 'our', non-contextual teaching of sensitive topics, which can become the metaphorical "danger of a single story" (Adichie 2009).

Topics connected with ethnic origin, migration, refugeeism, racism and discrimination seem to be the elements of curricula that teach awareness and are designed to contribute to developing empathy and sensitivity that motivate one to react to discrimination and abuse (Markowska-Manista, Dąbrowa 2016). What is more, reflexive teaching of sensitive topics using active methods in a classroom allows teachers to enhance the students' self-awareness and create a safe environment, which is a prerequisite for cultural opening to national and cultural diversity. Polish education implemented in a post-reform school space is perceived through nationalistic categories. This trend is visible in the curricula implemented in Polish schools, based on, inter alia, the canon of required reading, which was very similar in terms of the presentation of Others and their life worlds in the school days of present-day 40-year-olds. In an oppressive school, in its apparent activities (Dudzikowa, Knasiecka-Falbierska 2013), there is neither willingness nor space or ways to conduct intercultural or diversity education, hence the narrations of children with culturally diverse background about themselves are not considered or supported.

If we incorporate (in the pedagogical approach) the assumption that if "contemporary democratic societies are based on their citizens' skill to participate in rational discussions" (Barton, McCully 2007, p. 13), then it is our task as teachers to develop this skill in ourselves and in our students. Then, there is a clear need to teach the skill of critical reflection and reasoning, develop the need to analyse larger quantities of information from various sources, to avoid the metaphorical "danger of a single story", "threat of one history" or one-sided narration (Barton, McCully 2007).

Discussing sensitive topics in the classroom is connected with recommending reflexivity, openness and learning the skill of discussion, self-reflexion and thorough search for information (e.g. Hand, Levinson 2012; McAvoy, Hess 2013). Authors of *The Re-Imagining Migration Guide to Creating Curriculum* (2020) argue for the application of a holistic approach

to teaching, based on the realisation that good teaching is always done in relation to the students we teach, the community within we teach, school and classroom culture, as well as the particular context in which the classes are conducted, created and co-created by the students. It is thus important that the school be prepared to increased intercultural relations. It can be done through initiating the teaching of issues, fitting into sensitive topics connected with migration and cultural diversity.

On the other hand, we must reflect on how, from which sources and why from these rather than other sources, we teach in the 21st century and what knowledge we transfer to our students. The list of required reading does not include black or national and ethnic minority authors. The majority of narrations about Others and Foreigners reflecting our common history has been written and presented in school textbooks in a Eurocentric context based on the pillar of delivering development and education to other continents. In the debates and discussions about changes in curricula, there are no voices pointing to the need for the decolonisation of Polish-centric curricula. This involves verifying the sources of knowledge that could support the process of challenging long-lasting prejudice and neglect as well as distortions which limit how we and our students understand the society, social relations and the complex conditioning of living in the world. Decolonisation in education is a long-lasting process of changes fitting into the walls of a reflexive school and reflexive teachers. It is an attempt at overcoming rooted inequality and bridging the gap in providing access to recognised sources of knowledge. It also means providing space to those whose stories and voices have not been considered. The decolonisation of school curricula usually involves a fundamental revision of who teaches, what the subject is and how teaching is done within it (Moncrieffe et al., 2019). In this approach, every good curriculum has to consider the diversity of students taught by reflexive teachers and refer to a multi-contextual background of the classroom, school and community in which the process of teaching is taking place.

Conclusion

In light of the growing number of students with diverse cultural background in Polish schools and the presence of Polish students with migration background (parent or parents), it seems necessary to prepare teachers to work in diverse school classrooms in a way that is both adequate to the challenges and based on non-discriminatory practices of intercultural education and cross-cultural communication (Błeszyńska 2017, Gębal 2017). It is also important to redefine the narratives of othering and belonging

in diverse classrooms. This in turn is connected with the necessity to confront and question the colonising practices which influenced education in the past, and which are still present, for instance, in attitudes based on the stereotypisation of others, asymmetric relations or neo-colonialism as well as the ‘solidarity and compassion’ or ‘unproblematic multiculturalism’ rooted in social discourse (Pietrusińska 2020). All these issues present in the curricula of non-contextual teaching, concerning sensitive topics referring to cultural diversity in Polish schools, make us aware of the fact that education is an important aspect of colonisation. Interest in this matter in the context of educational change counteracting the dehumanising narrations about others and discriminatory practices in the school culture, should be treated as an imperative.

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