Intercultural Education in Cieszyn Silesia

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Abstract The leading idea of the presented study is the assumption that the vision of intercultural education has had and currently is reflected in activities aiming at political, economic and cultural integration in Cieszyn Silesia. The article consists of three parts. In the first, the theoretical construction of the undertaken discussion is presented. The author refers here to theories of various origin: Tadeusz Lewowicki and Jerzy Nikitorowicz’s concept of intercultural education, Piotr Sztompka’s concept of society becoming, Miles Hewstone and Roger Brown’s intergroup contact and intergroup differentiation hypothesis. In the second and third part, the author provides some examples of activities undertaken by individuals, groups, institutions, and associations, which all aim at fulfilling the paradigm of coexistence in Cieszyn Silesia. Due attention is drawn to the way in which transmission and concern for cultural heritage has been combined with the implementation of the strategy of coexistence and integration in work with children, youth and adults. The discussion is narrowed to Cieszyn Silesia, the region frequently treated as particularly interesting due to its cultural specificity (clearly observed uniqueness resulting from the contact of different cultures), religious pluralism, historical experiences, and borderland location.

Keywords: intercultural education, integration, coherence, multicultural community


1. Introduction

What seems currently demanded is the development of multicultural societies with full respect for the principle that nobody is better or worse but just different – the communities should aim at the strategy of coherence or integration. The hopes and chances for implementing this are brought about by intercultural education, which constitutes a life-giving source of mutual development, a chance for experiencing unlikeness and peace.

The discussion will be limited to Cieszyn Silesia, the region frequently treated as particularly specific due to its religious pluralism, social capital, historical experience, and borderland location (on the Polish-Czech borderland in the south of Poland). This area has a diverse and rich historical past. It has been a significant political, economic and cultural centre. Frequently, it has been treated as a field of political tenders. After the fall of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, in 1920 the Conference of Ambassadors in Spa made the decision to divide Silesia between Poland and Czechoslovakia. Nowadays, it is a rare case in Europe of the region with clearly shaped specificity resulting from the clash of different cultures – the region which maintained its cultural uniqueness despite the lack of possibility to legitimize its autonomy in a formal way [1].

2. Theoretical Foundations of the Discussion

Contemporary intercultural education aims at support for the process of shaping identities enriched with elements of different cultures - multidimensional identities which harmoniously link local, regional, state, national, European or even global dimensions.

Such education heads for opening to other communities and cultures, to mutual applications of the cultural output, to mutual support for cultures. People (and their cultures), instead of ‘beside’, should be and act ‘together’ for the good of the participating individuals, societies and their cultures [2,3,4].

Several currents can be indicated in viewing and dealing with intercultural education: the anthropological current, the philosophical-political one, sociologism, pedagogism. In the undertaken discussion, the anthropological perspective is applied – it is to enhance the mutual enrichment of cultures, closer contacts of people, and the attitudes of tolerance and acceptance towards dissimilarity [2].

The vision of intercultural education is reflected in social practice in the Polish-Czech borderland – this is dealt with in numerous studies (56 works published in the series “Edukacja międzykulturowa /Intercultural Education/”. No danger of losing national identity enables the young to view themselves as members of the nation, Europe and the world. This fact drew attention of T. Lewowicki [5] still in the nineties of the 20th century. The results of the conducted studies seem to prove that the understanding of identity is undergoing substantial changes. The multidimensional identification of youth: I feel a Pole, an European, a citizen of the world, a Silesian,
allows for predicting success of the European integration with simultaneous respect and maintenance of family, regional and national values [4,6,7].

A general theoretical framework which can be applied in the context discussed above is the concept of society becoming. The ability of a society to self-transform is described by P. Sztompka as its recognition, which he refers to the state of social resources or the capital of recognition possessed by the society. The capital of recognition mostly consists of structural resources (organizational and institutional – legal, political, economic – forms in which the society functions) and human resources (qualifications, competences, knowledge, skills, attitudes, mentality of particular society members). The third type comprises cultural resources. Moral bonds, as the tissue of social confidence, locality and solidarity, are significant determinants of permanence, continuity or change in contemporary societies [8].

A thesis can be put forward that there is a relation between the socio-cultural capital of Cieszyn Silesia and the feeling of the individual’s identity. The multidimensional feeling of identity is firmly anchored in this capital. This occurs due to the capital of recognition (structural, human, and cultural resources) and the policy of ethnicity implemented by local authorities, the state, and the European Union. The discussed capital is not a value itself, its value is measured as the sum of other capitals – human, social, cultural, economic, and political ones.

The southern borderland, exemplified in a specific way by the case of Cieszyn Silesia, has a long tradition (present for many centuries) of multidimensional approach to identity and integration [9]. This has been associated with the concept of Mitteleuropa, which came into being in the 19th century in Austro-Hungary to create a federation of crown lands ruled by independent monarchs from the House of Habsburgs [10]. The awareness (shaped at that time) of the unity of Central Europe as a space of high economic rank, stability, welfare, ethos of work, keeping order, as well as of peaceful coexistence of Slavic and German states within Austro-Hungary might affect identity behaviours of people in Cieszyn Silesia till the present day. They declare and present the multidimensional feeling of identity and undertake activities aiming at integration of individuals, groups and communities.

What seems particularly attractive in reference to integration processes taking place in the multicultural environment is Miles Hewstone’s “hypothesis of contact” [11]. The attitudes formed by the own experience constitute a better predictor of behaviour. Positive contact, the experience of “ordinary conflictless coexistence”, results in reduction of fear; owing to the techniques of learning based on cooperation, representatives of various ethnic groups make friends with each other, get access to new environments, which facilitate the development of further contacts. In compliance with this concept, the meeting of representatives of different groups (which occurs in Cieszyn Silesia) improves their mutual relations. Contact can weaken prejudice and stereotypization or enhance them – this depends on the character of contact (positive or negative), the participants, and the situational context.

Cieszyn Silesia residents use everyday contacts for mutual recognition, exchange, and borrowings. The practice of daily life necessitates cooperation and dialogue. In the conditions of the discussed region, implementing intercultural education takes place in an exemplary way.

Some cases of activities aiming at the paradigm of coexistence performed by individuals, groups, institutions, and associations will be presented here. Due attention will be also paid to how the transmission and care for cultural heritage is combined with the implementation of the idea of integration in work with children, youth and adults.

3. Tradition of Coexistence and Integration in Cieszyn Silesia

Cieszyn Silesia has a huge sociocultural capital – hence, the potentialities associated with resources of (spiritual and material) culture, institutions responsible for this wealth, and human resources. This capital is mostly described by the history and tradition of the region and by its cultural or educational specificity. These are not all the constituents of the capital as its full description is not feasible in practice; however, they are the most significant and recognized in typical characterizations of social, cultural and human capital [12,13,14]. The description is complemented and broadened with basic information on economic potential, trade, and cooperation in various fields of life in the borderlands.

The cultural identity of Cieszyn Silesia is determined not only by what is genetically own but also by the phenomena which were borrowed at different times and recognized as the own. The cultural heritage, with which the inhabitants of this region identify as their own, belongs to the traditional peasants’ culture, passed down the generations with conservatism and greatest care. What remains a significant element of this heritage is the local dialect, a consolidating factor of the complex Silesian-Polish identity. The dialect comprises elements of the Czech language, its Moravian variety and the Polish language [15].

Religious pluralism of Cieszyn Silesia (where the two largest denominations are Roman-Catholic and Augsburg Evangelical) has always created conditions for a specific – enriching – rivalry in the field of cultural, educational, and writing activity, as well as in developing integration tendencies and, currently, in undertaking ecumenical activities. All this has substantially contributed to shaping the complex identity of the inhabitants of this land.

The stability of Cieszyn Silesians’ behaviour is determined by relatively well-preserved social and religious bonds. The residents’ experiences collected in centuries-long contacts with other national groups (living in borderlands or at major trade routes) developed a more distinct (than anywhere else) tolerance in them. Undoubtedly, contacts with the neighbouring communities enrich culturally and, in general terms, teach tolerance even if it is superficial or imposed by increased trade contacts in borderlands.

The idea of integration in Cieszyn Silesia is also present in folk tales. The legend about founding the town of Cieszyn seems the most famous. The castle town was established in 810 A.D. out of the need to discover the unknown and distant world, which was followed by the meeting of three brothers.
Moral education in Cieszyn Silesia has been always oriented towards maintaining the model social bonds. Owing to its temperance, school has developed the foundations for tolerance, of which contemporary residents of the region are proud, and implemented the idea of coexistence of Poles, Czechs, Germans, people of different religions and denominations. Contacts with others and learning from them took place still in the 15th century, when Cieszyn was strongly associated with the well-known European universities – mainly in Cracow, Prague and some German towns. Bilingualism was not an existential obligation but just the acquisition of an additional (in its various meanings) asset in fulfilling life needs, in public activity, and professional life [16].

What seems significant in this territory is the tradition of educating teachers (1905 – the first teacher training courses, 1911 – establishing the Polish Seminary for Teachers, currently the Faculty of Ethnology and Education of the University of Silesia). The Cieszyn part of the university fulfills important culture creating functions in the region, it is a scientific centre which undertakes broad research tasks concerning e.g. social, cultural, and educational determinants of the young’s identity. The faculty educates both teachers and animators of cultural life and it implements the ideas of intercultural education among students, teachers, children and youth [17].

The awareness of regional unity has been also kept by various institutions, organizations, and associations (the Museum of Cieszyn Silesia, founded in 1802; libraries, reading rooms – e.g. the Library of Rev. Leopold J. Szersznik’s Foundation, the Cieszyn Library) [9].

Only some selected facts concerning the past of the educational and scientific movement in Cieszyn Silesia will be provided to confirm the paradigm of coexistence which takes place here. This will be supplemented by examples of current activities towards political, economic and cultural integration.

4. Coexistence and Integration – the Present Day of Cieszyn Silesia

Both towns Cieszyn (in Poland) and Czech Cieszyn (in the Czech Republic) have some achievements in joint implementation of projects which concern the management of borderline areas. The activities undertaken by the Euroregion Cieszyn Silesia can be mentioned here, such as the renovation of the Castle Hill along with castle grounds or opening the Noiva café - a place referring to the Avion - Border Crossing café, which existed in this place in the interwar period.

The activity within the transfrontier cooperation of Cieszyn and Czech Cieszyn is a benchmark for the whole Euroregion. Entering the Schengen zone brought about many changes: increased accessibility to transport, revitalization of sport and recreation grounds in both towns (a network of new bike and walking lanes, restoration of the kayak pond, modernization of the camping site along with its new gastronomic-social base). All these projects are implemented jointly with the town of Czech Cieszyn, within the framework of the project “Schengen and integration of Cieszyn Silesia”.

Joint cultural events are undertaken by theatres in both cities, where plays by Polish and Czech authors are presented. The theatre Těšínské Divadlo in Czech Cieszyn familiarizes spectators with the interesting and complicated history of Cieszyn Silesia in the play entitled “The Cieszyn Sky”. The myths and stereotypes concerning residents of the town are treated here with humour. The performance constitutes an attractive lesson of the history of Little Homeland, which is useful not only for the young but also for teachers carrying out classes of that type at school.

It is worth indicating that the dynamics of cultural life in Cieszyn Silesia is strengthened by events with participation of international audience. They comprise the International Theatre Festival “On the Border” or the Opera Music Festival “Viva il canto”.

Due attention should be also drawn to the undertakings of Cieszyn organizations and institutions which promote transfrontier cooperation and tolerance. Cieszyn Social Interclub holds cyclic meetings concerning the issues of culture, ecumenism, health, and history of other countries [18]. The Polish-Indian Friendship Association presents the knowledge of geography, history, and religions of India, it organizes music presentations, exhibitions, art and literary contests on Indian issues [19]. The Esperantists Club organizes distant trips to Australia, Finland, Columbia, they offer individual and group courses of Esperanto and publish leaflets or coursebooks [20]. The Cieszyn Club of Hobbyists undertakes works aiming at familiarization with other cultures and maintaining contacts between groups of Polish and foreign collectors by lectures, talks, exhibitions, antiques fairs [21]. The Travel Agency “Promenade” promotes French culture in Poland and Polish culture in France [22].

What has substantially contributed to familiarization of the local community with the real state of Polish-Czech and Polish- Slovakian relations is the Association Polish-Czech-Slovakian Solidarity in Cieszyn. Its activity results in such undertakings as the “Three Brothers’ Holiday”, the International Theatre Festival “On the Border”, or Cieszyn Jazz Fall [23].

Some good experiences in integration have been also worked out by the Mutual Help Association “To Be Together” [24]. It promotes the ideas of interculturalism, exchange, borrowings, and coexistence, which are present in intercultural education. The Association engages the young from both countries in its projects by joint actions heading for local activation, by creating possibilities for spending leisure time in an active and constructive way, by broadly understood prevention of addictions and destructive behaviour, and by the Polish-Czech integration. While acting together, young people have chances to work in a team, solve conflicts together, and raise responsibility for joint undertakings. Moreover, they learn more about the neighbouring country, its inhabitants and customs, they learn openness, tolerance and respect for unlikeness, and they develop civic attitudes and prepare for active participation in shaping the social life.

The activity of the Silesian Castle of Art and Entrepreneurship in Cieszyn [25] is worth mentioning as well. This cultural institution acts on the border of culture and business. It organizes unique exhibitions, workshops, conferences, and encourages local business people to take part in regular meetings of the Entrepreneur’s Club or to learn the Czech language.
Various Polish-Czech educational undertakings take place in the region to promote integration. They are aimed at teachers, children and youth.

Educating and retraining teachers in the border zone in regional cultural heritage was the goal of the project “Cieszyn Silesia – a little homeland in Europe”. The cycle of 12 meetings (6 implemented by the Czech side, 6 by the Polish one) was attended by teachers from primary schools in both countries. During lectures, trips, workshops and methodological meetings, they broadened their knowledge on cultural heritage of selected sites in the euroregion [26].

Another interesting case of actions addressed at learners and teachers is the project “Tales and legends of Cieszyn Silesia”, implemented by the Faculty of Ethnology and Education of the University of Silesia and co-financed by the European Union within the program Phare CBC Poland Czech Republic 2001 in the Euroregion Cieszyn Silesia. The project gave rise to an anthology comprising legends and tales of the region and texts written in dialect both in Polish and Czech.

Spreading the idea of multi- and interculturalism, the Cieszyn Faculty of the University of Silesia cooperates with the local community on both sides of Cieszyn Silesia. In 2009-2011, the Faculty together with the Congress of Poles in the Czech Republic implemented the project “Cultural heritage as the key to the identity of the Polish-Czech borderland in Cieszyn Silesia – at the 1200th anniversary of Cieszyn” (financed from the Operational Program of Transfrontier Cooperation RCZ-RP 2007-2013 in the Euroregion Cieszyn Silesia). The activities within the project comprised: the exhibition “Cieszyn residents’ self-portrait”, a scientific publication, producing a DVD entitled “Cieszyn Silesia – places, figures, events”, which – among other things – included students’ recorded opinions and reports concerning workshops for secondary school youth on both sides of the border. The workshops were conducted in both Polish and Czech and they focused on cultural diversity, transmission of traditional values, stereotypes, and intercultural learning. Acting together deepened the knowledge on particular undertakings, shaped the ability to feel the needs and emotions of people of different languages, nationalities and religions. The young acquired skills in intercultural education. The workshops were organized and carried out by scholars and students from the Faculty of Ethnology and Education. The established cooperation between Czech and Polish secondary schools should enhance integration of the young and appropriate understanding of borderland multiculturalism.

Another initiative of the Cieszyn scientific environment concerning regional and intercultural education was the project “Colourful paths” [27], implemented in 2010-2011 in cooperation with the Czech Pedagogical Centre for Polish Minority Education. The project was targeted at kindergarten teachers and class I-III teachers of primary education in Poland and the Czech Republic and comprised 6 educational paths: the ecological, the historical, the path of tales, fables and legends, the contemporary path, the path of tradition and the path of Cieszyn, as well as intercultural workshops “We learn together”. The project resulted in: a methodological publication for teachers, which comprised materials for teachers and exercises for children at kindergarten and early school age, two conferences, educational trips and workshops for teachers.

What is an important field of activity in intercultural education is educating future teachers. Teachers’ work belongs to social professions, the priority of which is acting for the good of another person. My own experiences in work with students will be referred here – those collected both in teaching the subject multi- and intercultural education and in the activities undertaken by members of the Student Research Team for Intercultural Education at the Faculty of Ethnology and Education of the University of Silesia.

Since 2002, practical implementation of intercultural education has comprised the subject multi- and intercultural education, taught at bachelor’s, master’s, and postgraduate studies within the course of pedagogy. Among other things, the classes involve: preparing notional maps, in which students present the problem of meeting the other and familiarization with unlikeness, noticing the equitable rank of the representative of another culture, indicating that tolerance, acceptance, and cooperation are the bridges of mutual understanding. The foundations for discussion and action are found in the texts of culture and social thought of philosophers. Significant contribution to the integration of academic community and the communities of Cieszyn and Czech Cieszyn has been made by the Student Research Team for Intercultural Education, which is supervised by me. Students do research; develop their skills of academic writing; organize conferences and seminars; keep unceasing contacts with educational institutions in both borderland towns; prepare and carry out cycles of educational and tutelary classes (on traditions and rituals); conduct classes and workshops for youth, e.g. on tolerance or human rights; meet local activists at open lectures. They take part in scientific conferences and organize them – the cycle “Meet the Other” (a Czech, a Romani, a Jew, a German, a Frenchman, an American). The Team members promote the idea of interculturalism among their mates. They learn Polish highlanders’ tunes and dances, as well as Romani or Jewish ones. They also organize events promoting tolerance, e.g. the International Day of Tolerance, or local culture – “Silesian Days”: These happenings take place along with exhibitions of artistic works of the young and of local artists, photographic exhibitions, performances of artistic groups, student feasts, film presentations, and competitions. By participation in European Union programs Socrates/Erasmus, the team members familiarize foreign students and scholars with the Polish culture. They also cooperate with research teams in other academic centres, associations, and educational institutions in Poland and abroad.

5. Conclusions

In the European dimension, education is to focus on four aspects which will constitute lifelong pillars of knowledge for each individual: to learn in order to know (i.e. to acquire the tools for understanding); to learn in order to act (to be able to influence one’s environment); to learn in order to live together (to take part and cooperate with others in various dimensions of human activity); and finally - to learn in order to be [28].
Beyond any doubt, to learn in order to live together is a major challenge for contemporary education. It seems that this can be fulfilled by intercultural education as its significant feature is the transcultural character of the processes of mutual learning, getting closer and being together – the integration.

Encounters and contacts between cultures, not only those on both sides of national or ethnic borders but all the intercultural contacts, are the daily routine in Cieszyn Silesia. They result in enriching the own culture with the assimilated alien elements and in activating defense mechanisms to preserve the old values recognized as the own. These are complex processes – therefore, it is worth not only to explore them but also to specify the range of their influence. Cross-group interactions are accompanied not only to explore them but also to specify the range of local/regional community on one hand, and on the other, areas of life of Cieszyn Silesia residents are examples – or mechanisms to preserve the old values recognized as the basis for negotiation, compromise, and agreement.

In Cieszyn Silesia, the objective obligation of transcultural lifelong learning from each other, i.e. crossing the borders of one’s own culture as a result of expanding contacts with others, is becoming a chance for subject-oriented existence of individuals, groups, communities – a source of peaceful coexistence. This is also a real chance for self-development, self-perfection and enriching one’s own identity.

It seems that the Cieszyn Silesia community is aware that its future less and less depends on the state and national borders but all the more on participation in the European community and in the increasing globalization.

The community’s culture is created and shaped by people through active participation. Natural everyday contacts, the need of solving problems, and the need of answering new challenges in the current reality push people towards undertaking dialogue, towards tolerance and integration. The situations of coexistence, cooperation, the care for one’s own culture and identity, combined with shaping positive attitudes and cooperation in different areas of life of Cieszyn Silesia residents are examples – or maybe models – to apply in other conditions.

References