THE SOCIALIZATION PROCESS OF REFUGEE CHILDREN IN POLISH SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Refugeeism and migration are the inevitable phenomena observed in the modern world which make modern science pay attention to new areas of research. These phenomena permeate different aspects of social, educational, political, and economic life. Over the last few decades Poland has been a country with a culturally homogenous society. However, upon Poland’s accession into the European Union the legal regulations concerning the reception of people from other countries were changed. The opening up of borders resulted in the influx of immigrants, refugees, and workers from culturally diverse backgrounds. Polish schools have also been affected by the phenomenon of refugeeism. The presence of refugee children in Polish schools has become a reality, making the creation of multicultural classrooms a necessity.

The article presents the socialization phenomenon of refugee children in Polish schools. The research was conducted in selected urban and rural primary schools located in proximity to the Polish-Belarusian border in order to investigate the issue. The schools were not randomly selected and their choice was determined by the fact that the largest number of refugee centres is located in this area in comparison with other regions of Poland. In all schools where the research was performed there are multicultural classrooms attended by Polish and refugee children of varying nationalities.

The article presents the answer to the following question: “How do primary schools implement tasks related to the socialization process of children studying in multicultural classrooms?”. The research problem was further expanded on the issue of peer relationships in multicultural classes, the diagnosis of factors supporting and hindering the socialization process, and the specific actions undertaken by urban and rural schools. By reason of the research subject, qualitative research methods were used, namely individual interviews with teachers. The research results indicated a wide range of actions performed by Polish schools in the process of education of refugee children. School is the place where the relationship with a refugee is established, barriers, fears, prejudice and stereotypes are overcome. Polish primary schools both in rural and urban areas can meet the challenge as far as the socialization of Polish and foreign children is concerned. The conducted research made it possible to identify a number of factors shaping the socialization process of children in multicultural classrooms in a positive way, which will be of importance for their personal development and the development of the whole society. Bearing in mind that the phenomenon of refugeeism is on the rise, it can be presumed that education plays the key role in the socialization process of foreign children, and gives them the chance for a normal life.

Keywords: students, socialization, primary schools, multicultural classrooms, refugees.

1 INTRODUCTION

Countries around the world are becoming culturally and ethnically diverse because of the reception of children and families through involuntary migration. Poland’s accession to the European Union has also brought changes in the reception of migrants and refugees. Until 2016, the average yearly number of migrants applying for the refugee status in Poland was 2,000, at least half of which were children. In a situation when going home is not a viable option, integration in the country which has given them shelter is the best solution for refugees. Apart from exceptional situations, refugees want to live like other people do, educate their children and maintain a sustainable livelihood. Many refugees are the most vulnerable people, for example, children who have undergone traumatic experiences. For such children regular school attendance can be the source of stability, the way to recover and hope for the future. When children are thrown in ‘at the deep end’ they interact with their peers and learn the language of the host country very fast, which facilitates their integration process and makes them help and guide their parents in a new country.

Taking into the consideration the fast growing phenomena of migration and refugeeism, it should be noticed that they permeate nearly all spheres of human life, including education which has a vital role...
to play for refugee communities. Hence, the question arises if Polish schools are ready to accommodate students of different cultural background and work with them effectively. Operating in a multicultural environment and encountering the issue of refugeeism on a daily basis, Polish schools are faced with a difficult task. In accordance with the law in force, refugee children in Poland are subject to compulsory education and they are entitled to receive it free of charge [1]. However, attendance rates among refugee children are low, or they even sometimes drop out of school. Such a situation is a direct consequence of the fact that they have not had the chance to develop the habit of learning and preparing systematically for classes so far. In addition, there is a problem of a language barrier, a poor command of the Polish language or the language is not known at all ([1], [2]). As a direct consequence of the before mentioned facts, children have learning difficulties and do not take part in extracurricular activities offered by schools. In some cases refugee children are isolated from their peers due to their cultural distinctiveness and lack of knowledge of the Polish language. Activities of Polish schools pertaining to education of children of various nationalities, cultures and religions are regulated in legal terms. The Regulation by the Minister of National Education on the core curriculum for general education in primary schools determines school’s tasks regarding education of children of different ethnic or religious background [3]. The document states that schools should develop “respect for other people, willingness to participate in culture, credibility, and self-esteem. In the process of social development it is very important to shape a civic attitude, respect for tradition and culture of your own people, and an attitude of respect for other cultures and traditions. Simultaneously, schools should take the appropriate measures to prevent any kind of discrimination” [3]. It follows from the above that tasks performed by schools should shape citizenship and contribute to the social development of a student. The dynamics of these processes, which is of considerable importance for children of primary school age, should also be mentioned.

Social development of children and the shaping of a civic attitude enumerated in the core curriculum are to be implemented by Polish schools. The two processes should not be analyzed only in the narrow context of a class or school but also within thebroader context of the society because they are inextricably associated with the social impact on an individual. When writing about the society, the sociologists August Comte and Herbert Spencer used the metaphor of an organism. Just like a living body is not just a sum of its cells, tissues and organs but a cohesive and functioning together whole, society is not just a simple sum of people but an integrated and well functioning social organism ([4], [5]).

In Polish and European sociological literature various definitions of the socialization concept and many descriptions of the process from different scientific perspectives can be found. Piotr Sztompka defines socialization as “the process of inducting an individual into the social world. From this perspective socialization is a process through which an individual becomes a proficient member of a social group”. [6]. The author discerns different levels of socialization. At the general level, this involves acquisition and internalization of competences and skills which are necessary to perform as functioning members of a given society. Communication skills and basic moral standards of coexistence with mutual respect and tolerance for diversity constitute so called ‘cultural fundamentals’ required of all society members. The next level of socialization, according to Sztompka, involves becoming a part of a specific culture, thus acquiring its cultural content of ideas, beliefs, rules, norms, values and symbols. In the case of Polish culture this process involves learning the Polish language, customs, folkways and traditions [7].

Another level of socialization occurs when an individual assumes different social roles to which he aspires, for example, when he/she learns the role of a husband, wife, mother-in-law, a professional role of a lawyer, teacher or a political role of a citizen. Such roles are carriers of cultural patterns, and role performance develops skills which are necessary for being accepted into a group the individual desires to belong to. This view of socialization indicates that it is a one-way process the direction of which is from the agents of socialization (like family, schools and peers) to the individual. It should also be noted that its dynamic character manifested in new roles which are assumed in different social groups is an essential feature of socialization.

The process of socialization is influenced and shaped by the social environment the individual lives in. Marian Filipiak claims that “the socialization process occurs by means of spontaneous imitation or informed decisions concerning self-upbringing, and is achieved by means of social interaction, namely reciprocal activities taking place between individuals as subjects of social life (mother-child, pupil-teacher, patient-doctor interactions)” [8].

In their research on socialization Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard and Anthony Giddens point to the fact that education is the key issue in this process ([8], [9], [10]). With regard to children of different cultural identities, amongst which refugee children should be included, the socialization process
performs two essential functions. The first one is cultural reproduction written about by Pierre Bourdieu [11]. If it was not for this process, each generation would have to start everything from the beginning, thus, the role of education is so vital. The second important function to be performed by socialization is that people’s activities should meet social expectations, embody shared ideals, values and conform to social norms ([6], [12], [13]). The mere fact that cultural orders and prohibitions, regardless of their content, are shared by all the members of a given group ensures that culturally designated activities are coordinated, foreseeable, while contact and interaction go ahead undisturbed. In other words, a certain social order is established. Nevertheless, attention should be paid to the fact that school is not able to cope with all the socialization tasks on its own. Cultural institutions, local communities, church and non-governmental organizations could be of assistance. On the other hand, it should be borne in mind that merely sending refugee children to school is not going to solve the problem.

Bearing in mind the issues connected with socialization and the role of school outlined above, it seemed advisable to conduct this research in order to learn how schools perform actions pertaining to the socialization of students in multicultural classrooms. At this point the concept of multiculturalism should be clarified. In Poland multiculturalism is understood in its broader meaning as multicultural education, while in its narrower sense it refers to multicultural classrooms attended by children of different nationalities [14]. In Europe, on the other hand, the term ‘interculturality’ is used to describe the interaction of people from different cultural backgrounds, while ‘intercultural education’ is a preferred term used in the school context [15]. Therefore, there is no universal, clear-cut definition of an education able to negotiate between cultures.

2 METHODOLOGY

Because of the systematic growth in the number of refugee children entering Poland, multicultural classrooms are organized and socialization activities are undertaken in Polish schools. Hence, the main purpose of the research was to shed some light on the socialization process of refugee children attending multicultural classrooms. The more specific objectives of the study were:

1. to learn about peer relationships in multicultural classrooms,
2. to identify specific actions performed by schools (teachers, students, and parents supporting the socialization process),
3. to recognize factors hindering the process of socialization.

The choice of location for the conducted research was governed by the fact that there are two refugee centers in Biała Podlaska District and the District is situated in the vicinity of the borders with Ukraine and Belarus. Pedagogical research was performed in two primary schools located in Biała Podlaska District, namely, Primary School No. 1 in Biała Podlaska (October 2016) and Primary School in Zalesie (November 2016). The choice of these schools was predetermined by the fact that multicultural classrooms attended by Polish and foreign children (most of which are refugees) can be found there.

2.1 Methods and procedures

By reason of the research subject, qualitative research methods were used since they are characterized by flexible instruments adaptable to various conditions and situations which cannot always be predicted before the beginning of research. Furthermore, the special nature of the socialization of children was taken into consideration as it should be noted that this process is difficult to measure or it is even not measurable in certain instances. The major advantage of qualitative research methods is that they make it possible to develop an in-depth understanding of a context which cannot be measured objectively. Hence, the choice of qualitative approach with the research method of unstructured interview was governed by the subject and the objectives of the research.

The method of unstructured interview deemed suitable for this study because questions could be adapted and changed depending on the respondents’ answers. Furthermore, this method gives the interviewer an opportunity to probe for a deeper understanding of a given issue. However, it should be noted that such an interview can be loosely guided by a set of questions. Taking into account the objectives of the study, the interview questionnaire was developed in order to identify factors and educational activities facilitating the socialization of children. The study was also to shed some light on the problems in establishing positive relationships between pupils and the sources of prejudice against refugees.
The unstructured interviews were conducted with 6 teachers working with children in multicultural classrooms (from the 1st to the 3rd grade); three teachers from each school participated in the research. The study’s ethical aspects, confidentiality of responses as well as informed consent were explained to the participants on the outset of each interview.

2.2 Results

All interviews were analyzed in order to identify recurrent themes. As a result, three thematic categories appeared. The first category focused on factors and situations hindering the socialization process. The second category concerned activities designed to facilitate socialization performed by educational institutions. The last category included comparison of socialization activities held by urban and rural schools.

2.2.1 Socialization Difficulties

All teachers participating in the study pointed to the language barrier as number one problem which prevented effective teacher-student or student-student communication. Language related issues are of crucial importance particularly for students starting education in a new school. To alleviate the problem, schools organized extracurricular Polish language classes. According to teachers working in multicultural classrooms, the majority of children coming from different cultural backgrounds overcame language barrier because they were highly motivated. However, it should be noted that primary school children from the first and second grade had less problems with learning the language than the older ones. Communication plays a key role in the socialization process as it provides a basis for acquiring knowledge, influences judgments and affects the functioning of the individual in a school environment.

Low academic achievement was mentioned by the interviewed teachers as the second most common problem. Some refugee children are older than their Polish classmates. This is due to the fact that they lag behind in learning, have considerable difficulties with basic mathematics, reading comprehension, writing simple sentences and spelling.

In the third place, cultural and religious differences were mentioned. It would seem that they would be the main problem in the socialization process; however, practice showed something different. According to teachers, foreign children are eager to learn Polish traditions and culture; they are waiting for Andrzejki (Saint Andrew's Day celebration in Poland) or Santa Clause. Refugee students readily talk about culture and customs of their own country. In response, schools organize special classes for Polish pupils to teach them about foreign cultures and traditions.

Post-traumatic stress is another problem of refugee children not only hindering their socialization in a new environment but also jeopardizing the chance to live a normal life. The direct consequences of trauma are intrusive distressing recollections of past events. Recurrent mental pictures of traumatic events are so vivid that they cause overwhelming panic attacks and nightmares. Hence, refugee children suffering from post traumatic stress disorder are distrustful, apprehensive and apathetic; they often lose interest in school activities and are not willing to follow the teacher’s instructions. This kind of behavior has a negative impact on teamwork and refugee students’ functioning within the group or class. In spite of these problems, the teachers do not become discouraged, take action to activate and integrate children through, for example, playing, baking cookies or going on school trips together.

Another factor hampering the socialization process of refugee children is the frustration of their parents. Parental depression is, to a varying degree, also felt by children. Staying in a host country for a longer period of time involves the necessity of establishing closer relationships with local inhabitants and officials, which may be frustrating. Foreigners feel that they are often misunderstood, and cannot communicate effectively with local inhabitants. Lacking support of their parents, refugee children feel frustrated and angry with themselves. Consequently, they do not build positive relations with other member of a group and become alienated.

Lack of motivation to learn was another factor identified by the teachers. Motivating students is not an easy task, sustaining this motivation is even more difficult in the case of children who are not stimulated by their parents at all. This is a challenge which must be met by teachers and the whole school environment. Effective methods and unconventional solutions must be found in order to overcome this problem.

The problem of fears and concerns on the part of refugee parents was rarely mentioned by the teachers. Some parents did not send their children to school for fear of losing them. These were rare cases, nevertheless, they took place in the families which had lost one of their children during the war.
or while escaping. Parents were afraid of losing another child so they wanted to keep children close to them.

Prejudice of Polish children against refugee pupils was the last factor enumerated by teachers during the interviews. The scale of the problem is quite small, and the prejudice is overcome when children get to know each other better. Lack of language skills seems not to be the problem as children manage to communicate effectively and integrate into peer groups.

2.2.2 Activities Supporting Socialization

Form teachers in multicultural classrooms speak a foreign language, which facilitates communication, didactic and educational work. In both schools participating in the research, the majority of children spoke Russian; hence, the form teacher was a person with a good command of that language. All teachers conducting classes in these schools learnt about diverse cultures and norms of behavior of their foreign students. They also have the required skills to communicate and are sensitive about how to deal with each student.

Furthermore, schools adhere to customs and traditions of refugee children. Holidays and religious requirements are also observed, to name but a few: a boy and a girl cannot sit together at one desk, boys and girls attending physical education classes are supposed to wear long-sleeved shirts, and there are also dishes without pork served in the school canteen. Similarly, foreign pupils are expected to respect religion and culture of their new country. A positive attitude of teachers and Polish pupils towards the traditions and religion of foreign children helps to establish friendly relations and create the atmosphere of acceptance and cooperation. The above mentioned facts are indicative of the fact that diversity in social, cultural and religious spheres of life is respected in schools.

To support socialization, Polish and refugee children help to organize social events, go on school trips together, and take part in extracurricular activities. They also learn about traditional dishes, national dances, folk costumes and fairy tales characteristic for their countries. Different events organized by schools (meetings, festivals, school ceremonies) are attended by whole families of Chechen, Armenian and other foreign pupils. They are an excellent chance to make conversation, establish closer relations, and exchange experience with local inhabitants. As a result, such events help to break stereotypes present in the society of a host country.

Furthermore, in both schools additional extracurricular Polish language classes were organized. They were attended by all refugee children because their interest in learning the language was considerable. Children are highly motivated to learn the language because they hope to stay in Poland and to make it their permanent place of residence. According to teachers, children learn the language quickly, write and read in Polish, and they understand what they are told, although in some situations they prefer to pretend not to understand.

Another crucial factor facilitating socialization is a ‘natural integration’ in peer groups resulting from the natural desire of children to establish relations, make conversation and play. Polish pupils come into contact and establish relationships with Chechen or other refugee children without teacher’s support. Children communicate with each other, play or work together, and make friends. Such a ‘step by step’ integration strengthens the bonds and establishes positive relations, which facilitates the process of socialization.

2.2.3 Socialization Differences Between Urban and Rural Schools

Based on the comparative analysis of research findings, socialization differences were observed between urban and rural schools. In the rural school located in Zalesie Commune, relationships between Polish and refugee children are warm and friendly. Such a cordial atmosphere in multicultural classrooms has a beneficial influence on the process of socialization in peer groups. In rural schools, teachers often organize meetings with parents and other social events, which are an excellent opportunity to get to know each other and establish positive relationships between local residents and refugees from the Center. Rural dwellers have a chance to find out that refugees who came to Poland had fled from their countries because of persecution, to escape danger or even death.

On the other hand, the attitude of indifference was observed in the urban environment as local residents were perceived as not so open. According to the respondents, urban dwellers have limited knowledge about refugees. They rather associate immigration with ‘economic refugees’ who come to another country to improve their financial status. Moreover, some parents believe that refugees are financial burden to the Polish State as it has to bear excessive costs for their education and
such an attitude is a barrier in building positive relations and it hampers the socialization process.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Polish society has undergone many changes and has become more heterogeneous because of the influx of refugees, which entails the need for creation of multicultural classrooms and socialization schemes. Research findings showed that Polish schools in rural and urban areas meet the challenge of education and socialization of refugee children. Cultural and religious differences are clearly visible in small communities but they do not have a considerable influence on the socialization process.

Classroom has a very important role to play in the socialization of refugee children because it is a place where children come into contact with each other for the first time, establish relationships with peers, and where the barriers, prejudice and stereotypes are overcome. The analysis of the research data made it possible to draw a number of conclusions. Due to the limited area of research (Biala Podlaska District) the conclusions would not be generalized, and would be mainly used in school practice:

1 The socialization of refugee and Polish pupils in selected schools in Biala Podlaska District is progressing without major problems due to the fact that schools systematically undertake many educational, didactic and integrative measures.

2 A number of factors having a positive influence on the socialization process of refugee children were identified, including teaching methods and strategies used in multicultural classrooms, teachers’ commitment and attitude, and child’s personal potential (openness, empathy and cognitive activity).

3 Although some conflicts and behavior problems in multicultural classrooms may be observed, the peer relationships among children, in the majority of cases, are friendly. Establishing favorable attitudes towards refugee children and facilitating positive interactions are key factors in the socialization process.

REFERENCES


