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Kinga LISOWSKA

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8404-4363>

University of Warmia and-Mazury in Olsztyn, Poland

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## Equal opportunities in shaping pupils' identity in a multicultural school environment. A pilotage concept of work for transcultural education in grades I–III

### Abstract

Shaping children's and youth's identities from the perspective of dynamically changing societies after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian attack on Ukraine is one of the fundamental problems of educational and upbringing institutions. There is a lack of system solutions that take into account in the teaching and learning process both the pupil's home culture (often different from the environment of current residence) and the culture experienced in the perspective of life and education. Coexistence, building the cultural structure of individuals in multicultural societies, is possible by introducing, from the first stages of education, a transcultural approach to creating the school's reality. It also balances the chances of each pupil to find its references: experiences and values that shape individual and collective identity while establishing protection against "getting lost".

This article aims to present a pilot concept of work, which points to theoretical and practical solutions in the field of education for trans-culturalism in grades I-III. The concept should then be verified in the school environment from both teachers' and students' perspectives. It will make it possible to determine whether the planned activities and how they are presented are appropriate for children at the first stage of education and whether, based on the prepared material, it is possible to balance the chances of shaping the identity of individuals in multicultural environments.

**Keywords:** early school education, individual identity, collective identity, transculturality.

## Introduction

The political, economic and social world has undergone dynamic transformations in the last four years. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian attack on Ukraine, economic immigrants, sometimes returning with their entire families from European countries, and war refugees from Ukraine arrived in Poland. According to statistical data, by the end of 2020, the number of Poles staying abroad for more than three months was 176,000, lower than a year earlier and by over 300,000 than in 2017 (GUS, 2021). The most significant number of people who returned from Great Britain could fear the unfavourable effects of the British authorities' fight against the coronavirus, including the effects of restrictions on some sectors of the economy. The sense of an unstable social situation was also deepened by the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union (Kalwasiński, 2021).

However, the Russian attack on Ukraine has caused the largest migration crisis in the world in recent years. 15 million Ukrainians left the country – mainly women with children and seniors – 34% of the country's population. At the same time, until 2022, Poland experienced little inflow of migrants who applied for refugee status or subsidiary protection; it was treated as a transit country, with the predominance of short-term migration, usually lasting no longer than a few months, for work/economic reasons. February 24, 2022, is the date that changed the situation of the inflow of migrants to Poland. Currently, Ukrainian citizens are the largest group of foreigners legally residing in Poland (Wodzicki, Pichola, Patorska, 2022). Based on the Border Guard's data, since the beginning of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, over 10 million 604 thousand refugees from Ukraine have crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border (mainly women and children), with over 8.719 million people returning to Ukraine since the beginning of the war (KSG, 2023). According to the Centre for Analysis and Research of the Union of Polish Metropolises, it can be stated that together with the population of Ukrainian origin who arrived before February 24, 2022, there were approximately 3 million Ukrainian refugees in Poland in 2022, mainly in large cities (Centre for Analysis and Research of the UMP, 2022).

These events led to a change in Polish society's national and local structures, in which children with different experiences, values, origins and languages found themselves in school spaces, faced with the need for cooperation and coexistence but without transcultural codes.

The article presents theoretical and practical applications in the form of a pilotage concept of work for transcultural education in grades I–III. The concept – in subsequent research activities – tested in the school environment – is intended to:

- help to introduce an educational reality that will enable each individual (regardless of his or her native origin) to shape individual and collective identity in a multicultural social space;
- balancing the opportunities for building a cultural structure for students identifying with a different area of values and experiences than the one in which they pursue education, including reducing the sense of separateness/strangeness and developing cooperation and coexistence;
- enabling to pull together the group of multicultural pupils who identify their origin with the area in which they pursue education but who have weak identity structures; these structures, as a result of a dynamically changing society, may weaken and leave the individual without references – experiences and values that shape individual and collective identity;
- reducing the sense of “lostness” of every individual who, due to choosing inappropriate identity structures, succumbs to subcultural structures or heads towards social exclusion.

## Trans-culturalism in education

Trans-culturalism in the social and humanistic scope means

spatial being “beyond” the border(s) of given cultures and cultural mixing, which results in the emergence of new structures and cultural formations, built from heterogeneous networks, containing components common to other transcultural networks and differentiating elements (Nikitorowicz, Guziuk-Tkacz, 2021, p. 27).

It is also a scientific concept stating that modern cultures can undergo transitions/transversions, i.e. they are constructed in the shape of a puzzle (Nikitorowicz, Guziuk-Tkacz, 2021; Welsch, 1999). Cultural boundaries are constantly crossed in trans-culturalism, and new hybrid cultural qualities are created.

According to Wolfgang Welsch (1999), contemporary cultures, lifestyles, and life values interpenetrate to the point of their hybridisation. They are then not distinguished and become mixed, which creates their heterogeneity (Welsch, 1999). The interaction between two or more different cultural poles at the micro- and macro-social level becomes characteristic in this process. Cultural identity is shaped by taking into account the transnational territory to which belonging does not require the physical presence of an individual (Nikitorowicz, Guziuk-Tkacz, 2021).

In the problem of trans-culturalism, the human-culture relationship plays an essential role in the education process. An individual can take a passive or active attitude towards culture. In the first perspective, the relationship will be analysed based on the category of cultural patterns and considered as an external form that determines every person’s duties and social obligations. However, if

an individual adopts an active attitude towards culture, the individual-culture relationship is placed in the perspective of a person's cultural identity. It takes on an internal character, where the leading role is played by the meanings given by a man to cultural artefacts. Individuals then liberate themselves through art, religion, language or science (Misiejuk, 2015). According to Ralph Linton (2000), culture lies at the cultural foundations of every person, and valuation, constituting the cultural order, is the basis of collective mentality material and behavioural elements of culture, marked with a given cultural value, becoming symbols of social groups in society. Communication occurs indirectly, and the group's symbolic system (cultural artefacts and their canonical interpretations) creates a reference for the moral assessment of human behaviour (Linton, 2000).

Transculturality in educational activities takes meaning only when personal relationships are created concerning cultural artefacts, which include:

- physical artefacts – everything that constitutes material culture;
- linguistic artefacts – the characteristic language used by members of a given group and myths and legends conveying the history of the community from its point of view (Misiejuk, 2015);
- behavioural artefacts – behaviour patterns, customs and rituals (Kozłowski, Piotrowski, 2000).

The young generation, entering the world of artefacts, should consciously read and process information encoded in specific things or behaviours and recreate their emotional value. An artefact determining the relationship of an item to the nature of that item directs the will to take over and continue the elements of culture present in a given area and not in a specific generation. Therefore, children and youth should learn about cultural artefacts' importance in a specific historical time. Thanks to this, it is embedded in the structure of culture and develops a sense of responsibility and the ability to shape tradition in the young generation (Misiejuk, 2015).

Modern cultures are no longer confined to national borders. They are spreading to larger and larger areas and the populations they inhabit. In this way, they create new "configurations of connections" (Welsch, 1998, p. 204) and "macro-complexes" (Nikitorowicz, Guziuk-Tkacz, 2021, p. 28). Cultures have, therefore, cast off their homogeneity/distinctiveness, and their structures are subject to mutual penetration and intermingling (Welsch, 1998).

An individual in the concept of trans-culturalism acquires a sense of contingency. In the micro-social sphere, it understands the dynamic nature of transformations of cultural networks, which influence the constant changes in the problems and situations it encounters. Its self-structure "I" remains in contact with others, creating an ever-evolving form of a hybrid. The formation of an identity is, therefore, an activity aimed at integrating many elements of different cultural origins, which become significant for the cultural formation of an individual (Welsch, 1998).

Anyone wanting to know their transcultural structure must accept/recognise the transcultural community. In return, this becomes a determinant of the construction of human identity, i.e. “feedback” (Nikitorowicz, Guziuk-Tkacz, 2021, p. 28). Therefore, the pupil in the educational process should be an entity: dynamic, subject to constant changes, and prepared for the transition between different structures/transversion (Nikitorowicz, Guziuk-Tkacz, 2021).

The student’s cultural identity is then shaped concerning cultural artefacts that are recognised in connection with their presence in a given area and not in the tradition of a specific group. The individual adapts them to its activities, civilisational and own needs. It is also not bound by a constituted social symbol when communicating its cultural identity. Cultural identity becomes part of every person’s biography, and its possession is characterised by high cultural awareness (Misiejuk, 2015)

In transcultural education, a pupil must move from the sense of inheriting culture to the awareness of the possibility of acquiring and constructing it by detecting meanings and searching for the meanings that cultural artefacts have for him. If an individual functioning in a multicultural society does not receive a chance to construct these competencies, forming his or her identity will be accidental. It may ultimately lead to constant identity crises (Misiejuk, 2015).

## **The concept of identity - taking into account the educational process**

Identity, studied in many fields of science, is understood in the etymological context, meaning characteristic identity, which involves comparing or replacing one element with another. From a psychological perspective, it means the consciousness and self-awareness of an individual. However, in the metaphysical scope, this concept is associated with the immutability of being – its nature and essence. It can also be perceived as a set of features and properties enabling the identification of an entity or an object but taking into account the activities and relations between the subject and the object (Jeszka, 2022). We can also consider identity as primary and secondary (Dyczewski, 2015) and individual and collective (Kłoskowska, 1992).

Identity in the personal sphere is related to constructing the self’s structure “I”, i.e. the constitution of its ideas, judgments, beliefs and experiences (Zellma, 2002). An individual acquires a sense of uniqueness, specialness and distinctiveness by getting to know himself and determining the differences between himself and others (Piechaczek-Ogierman, 2019). Therefore, an individual’s identity is the psychophysical unity of the so-called “*proprium*”. A person is aware of being the same person despite the dynamically changing social, political and eco-

conomic reality and self-development. Does the individual know who it is, its roots, what groups it belongs to, and what it owes to them in shaping its personality? Identity in the self-structure is given and developed. Given by:

- nature – genetic, specific psychophysical features;
- culture – in the socialisation process, an individual receives from primary groups developed values, norms, behavioural patterns, the history of valued people and objects of everyday and ceremonial use, and a project of their future (Dyczewski, 2015).

According to Marek Szczepański (2003), shaping the “I” structure is the beginning of a process leading to the disclosure of the We structure – constituting a collective/social identity characterised by a system familiar to a given group: values, norms, customs, customs, language, and a specific territory. It is also based on the shared experience and internalisation of tradition, the present and defining the future (Szczepański, 2003). It is a set of self-definitions used to describe one’s person, based on which the individual differentiates between Us and Other People in terms of Us-not-Us, i.e. Them (Reber, 2002). Collective identity is associated with the awareness of belonging similarity to a specific group and social category. The individual acquires specific schemes that form the basis of contact with Others (Lisowska, 2022). At the same time, a person interprets himself in relation to Others and places his distinctiveness in a specific biography and experiences (Jeszka, 2022).

It can, therefore, be said that members of the same cultural structure are united primarily by collective memory, world perception, time and space continuum, a reference to historical events important in the life of a given community. It should be assumed that the centre of the identity structure is unchanged - but its peripheries are subject to transformation. The more they enter into relationships with the changing reality, the more they strengthen their “proprium” and, with it, their adaptive abilities. Therefore, if it comes to stagnation, identity will also end. It is constant and, at the same time, changeable – partly given but at the same time constructed. Modification occurs through (un)intentional communication with the environment and the need to belong or dominate and stay in the community (Jeszka, 2022).

An individual has several social identities because he or she belongs to several communities, and, depending on the degree and type of connection with them, they acquire appropriate features and values in them, i.e. they undergo a socialisation process. Then, we can talk about the formation of primary and secondary identities. Primary ones refer to the entire personality of an individual: spheres and the whole of life, giving it meaning. These include family, ethno-national and religious identities. A man cannot wholly free himself from them when trying to change them. If he opposes them, he starts an open fight and abandons all values. Otherwise, he always maintains the element of his primary

identity. Secondary identity results from a person's belonging to a given community - it is generally a choice and does not require total commitment but is subject to the goal pursued (Dyczewski, 2015). Social changes, however, require the ability to leave one group and move to another while maintaining the fundamental values of primary identity, assuming that they will not block the creation of new network connections.

At the same time, in culturally diverse societies, on the one hand, an individual has a sense of "familiarity", "being itself", "being at home", and on the other, it experiences "strangeness" and "otherness" (Nikitorowicz, 2005, pp. 96–97). During this time, it also feels constantly confronted with Others – people, groups and their characteristics: traditions and cultures, behaviours and lifestyles.

Children's identity in a multicultural society can be created if they can understand and evaluate themselves, as well as various situations, values, conditions, related groups/communities, and people (Nikitorowicz, 2005). The school is therefore faced with a new task in which a significant role is played: civilisation progress and the development of modern technologies, promoting valuable lifestyles that preserve the identity and subjectivity of groups and individuals. The school should, therefore, respond to changes taking place in areas of life outside school and translate them into the internal school environment:

- daily contact between students and teachers;
  - interactions between different cultural/family/inherited spaces;
  - coexistence of diverse cultural societies and national groups (Lewowicki, 2007).
- Developing students' identity in multicultural societies becomes indispensable to educational and upbringing activities. It is the process of:
- introducing cultural and religious pluralism;
  - creating students' subjectivity and autonomy;
  - implementing universal values into the world while developing attitudes of openness and tolerance.

Achieving identity determines an individual's autonomy and is closely related to accepting responsibility for one's choices and actions. In the existential sense, it determines the path of life and reflects perceived values (Schaffer, 2006). Without identity, a person becomes lost and should consciously perceive his place in the world, his immediate environment, and himself (Piechaczek-Ogierman, 2016).

For an individual to develop his or her identity in multicultural societies, one-dimensional perception of the individual should be rejected in the school space and a continuous process of human functioning in the so-called identity triad: inherited and acquired; roles and challenges, felt and realised. A multi-layered identity and, therefore, a solid existential foundation for a young person is possible when consciously maintaining one's identity in a new culture. Cultural differences that shape the pupil's identity should be adequately managed (Nikitorowicz, 2008).

## **Pilotage work concept**

The basis of the pilotage work concept is to indicate theoretical assumptions and methodological solutions enabling the implementation of the curriculum path in the field of education for trans-culturalism in grades I–III. It is an opportunity for equal access to educational and upbringing processes aimed at shaping pupils' identity in multicultural communities. The pilot work concept consists of activities in the space of school buildings, in the teaching-learning process, including the school classroom, in the social area.

### **1. The space of school buildings**

School buildings and their space are an excellent place to enable pupils to have daily contact with aspects of various cultural manifestations. At the same time, it should be remembered that each member of the school community has his or her identity structure acquired from the home environment, which he or she confronts with other structures during his or her stay at the institution. The school needs to enable pupils on the periphery of their identity to open up to what is new/different but also valuable.

Pupils should create a space where both manifestations of their culture and elements of other cultures meet: move from what is native to multiculturalism and finally to dialogue for trans-culturalism. This process is possible by engaging children in joint art and multimedia projects on multicultural themes and sharing the products created through them on the walls of the corridors, in the library and throughout the school building complex. Students can create:

- Christmas cards in different languages;
- drawings showing holiday traditions and the history of cultural groups and the countries they come from;
- dictionaries with basic phrases in the language spoken by all members of the school community;
- symbols characteristic of their cultural, ethnical minority or nation;
- create audio recordings: music; oral expressions in multiple languages; historical stories.

In this concept, each created product needs to be available not in coercion but in curiosity, voluntarism resulting from the desire to focus on otherness. At the same time, the cooperation of multicultural pupils during projects is an opportunity to construct a correct dialogue and open them to others/different/new. It is a stimulus to act both in the creative/artistic and identity spheres – enabling a complete openness to what goes beyond the structures of native identity. On the other hand, it is an opportunity for the school to enable culturally different pupils to develop their identity – constructing it with the possibility

of drawing valuable experiences from other members of the school community. It is also an opportunity for children and youth representing local cultures to be curious about otherness. Therefore, it is an opportunity for everyone to find their place in the space of dynamically changing social, economic and political structures. It is a chance for an equal sense of security and self-identification.

## 2. The teaching-learning process

At the first educational stage, the core curriculum indicates areas of activity in patriotic, regional and intercultural education (Regulation of the Minister of National Education..., 2017). However, it does not take into account:

- shaping pupils' identity based on combining what is native with what is experienced and considered valuable;
- Adaptive perspective of people who, as it were, "forced" (due to war, pandemic or other random situations) to find themselves in a culturally different environment.

Therefore, it is impossible to ensure equal opportunities in access to educational and upbringing activities, leading to the formation of pupils' identity in multicultural societies based solely on the core curriculum.

A teacher/educator of grades I–III, having close contact with pupils, should use, in his work to shape their identity, the transcultural approach of coexistence, combining elements of cultural structures that become significant and valuable for people who are different from each other. Above all, he should point out a possibility and make people sensitive to the desire to listen, look, find something different, and create a space for opening up/showing native traditions. So that it can be used in the form of a cultural artefact (created in a given area) and not merely inherited within a generation. The presented theoretical perspective can be achieved through the following practical activities:

- introducing into social and Polish education references to:
    - essential words and concepts in a multicultural perspective;
    - symbols, heroes and events in the history of Europe and the world;
    - both national holidays and global holidays in the multicultural meaning;
- The teacher should create abreast comparisons through worksheets, displayed images and spoken words (with exceptional help from students from a given cultural area). The special meaning will also have summative lessons, as they can include testing blocks for those willing to come from the indicated transcultural spaces.
- fairy tales and legends related to the culture of pupils in particular classes but told/read by themselves. So that the history of their ethnic or national group becomes alive and not just recreated by the teacher. In this case, one can also group pupils into teams in which they will learn fairy tales and legends about a cultural area other than the one they be-

long to. The memorised material should then be presented to the rest of the class. It is an opportunity to strive for coexistence and create cultural structures for pupils in relation to the world's cultural diversity on a micro and macro social scale. It is also a chance for cultural adaptation and equal opportunities to shape one's personality, regardless of origin.

- introduction to music, art and social education:
  - organising once a year performance that takes into account cultural differences but also their coexistence within the local community;
  - organisation of art competitions focused on promoting a transcultural approach to connecting and coexistence of various ethnic, national and religious groups in a given area;
  - implementation at the end of the first stage of education, an intercultural event taking the form of artistic performances, assuming the participation of various minorities from the school's area of operation;
  - educational trips to spaces, institutions and places related to the functioning of national, ethnic and religious minorities in a given regional area, considering the specificity of their functioning for the local community.

It is not about passive participation in cultural transgression but about consciously learning about different structures, values and experiences and acquiring the ability to evaluate them in the future from the perspective of one's own life. Therefore, it is essential to introduce during this type of didactic activity tasking of (all) pupils - responsibility for individual areas of the project and homework, which are an extension of each educational form and enable the consolidation of knowledge and the involvement of students in the learning process.

### **3. Social area**

Each educational institution cooperates with local non-governmental organisations, cultural institutions, higher education representatives, etc. It is essential to introduce active shaping of the social space, assuming a dynamically changing structure of the population of the regional environment. To this end, there should be developed a permanent presence of representatives of national, ethnic and religious minorities at school as well as regionalists - historical and cultural educators, who will run a block of additional classes in the form of school interest clubs in cooperation with teachers from a given educational institution. I suggest interest groups among the additional activities: regional culture, traditions of particular cultural areas of Europe, and the language of national and ethnic minorities. Classes should be adapted to the methodology of working with pupils at the first stage of education.

Such created school's reality will enable every young person to adapt to culture and shape their own identity (regardless of origin) with the possibility of

drawing not only from the native culture but also sensitising them to the values of other cultural spaces. It is an excellent opportunity to learn what is new and show the differences.

## Conclusions

The pilotage concept of the work formulates theoretical judgments. It provides practical solutions in the field of education for trans-culturalism, aimed at enabling pupils in grades I–III equal access to the processes shaping their individual and collective identity in a multicultural society. Education in the field of trans-culturalism is the creation of a new reality in the perspective of the dynamically changing society of Europe and the world as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's attack on Ukraine - and therefore intensifying the processes of migration and emigration of people and cultural mixing. It is also an opportunity to reduce the alienation among children who find themselves in a cultural area other than their original one and to prepare these individuals for cooperation and coexistence. At the same time, it is also a balancing act for pupils with weak identity structures to find their place in multicultural communities. The imbalance of identity and the inability to shape it may lead to children being left without cultural references and experience patterns. The school's task is to prevent pupils from "getting lost" and may succumb to subcultural structures or lead to social exclusion.

The presented pilotage concept requires further research:

1. analysis of the potential of creative work and the possibility of transmitting elements of their own culture to individual pupils who identify themselves with national, ethnic and religious minorities, including the possibilities of their use;
2. checking the proposed practical solutions, i.e. implementing work with the concept in a specific group of recipients, taking into account the origin of pupils, including multinational classes;
3. assessing teachers' capabilities in the field of transcultural activities, including specific forms of teaching work;
  - observation of the reception of individual stages of the concept - all proposed practical solutions: reactions, impressions and emotions of pupils and teachers;
4. description of a sample fragment of the script while indicating its communicative and cognitive qualities that will allow the message and proposed forms of work to be considered beneficial in the process of shaping identity among children at the first stage of education;
5. identification of the potential base of institutions and non-governmental organisations dealing with the space of local culture and tradition and national,

ethnic and religious minorities that can cooperate with the school environment.

In this way, the activities carried out will allow for verification of whether the topic (its scope) and the method of presentation are appropriate for children in grades I-III and whether, based on the prepared material, it is possible to shape individual and collective identity, necessary for living and functioning in the modern multicultural world?

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## **Równe szanse w kształtowaniu tożsamości uczniów w wielokulturowym środowisku szkolnym. Pilotażowa koncepcja pracy na rzecz edukacji w zakresie transkulturowości w klasach I–III**

### **Streszczenie**

Kształtowanie tożsamości dzieci i młodzieży, w perspektywie dynamicznie zmieniających się społeczeństw po wybuchu pandemii COVID-19 i ataku Rosji na Ukrainę, stanowi jeden z podstawowych problemów placówek edukacyjnych i wychowawczych. Brakuje bowiem rozwiązań systemowych, uwzględniających w procesie nauczania-uczenia się zarówno kulturę rodzimą ucznia (często różną od środowiska obecnego zamieszkania), jak i przeżywaną w perspektywie życia i edukacji. Współistnienie, budowanie struktury kulturowej jednostek w społeczeństwach wielokulturowych jest możliwe poprzez wprowadzanie, od pierwszych etapów edukacji, podejścia transkulturowego w kreowaniu rzeczywistości szkolnej. Istotne jest tu także równoważenie szans każdego ucznia na odnalezienie własnych odniesień: doświadczeń i wartości kształtujących tożsamość indywidualną i zbiorową, a przy tym ukonstytuowanie ochrony przed „zagubieniem”.

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie pilotażowej koncepcji pracy, w której wskazuje się na rozwiązania teoretyczne i praktyczne z zakresu edukacji na rzecz transkulturowości w klasach I–III. Koncepcja ta powinna zostać następnie zweryfikowana w środowisku szkolnym zarówno w perspektywie nauczycieli, jak i uczniów. Pozwoli to na stwierdzenie, czy zaplanowane działania oraz sposób ich prezentacji są właściwe dla dzieci na pierwszym etapie edukacji oraz czy na podstawie przygotowanego materiału można równoważyć szanse w kształtowaniu tożsamości jednostek w środowiskach wielokulturowych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja wczesnoszkolna; tożsamość indywidualna; tożsamość zbiorowa; transkulturowość.