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Polish Language Learning and Multicultural Education: Challenges in the Wielkopolska Region

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Introduction

Although Poland has a self-image of being a monolingual country, bilingualism and multilingualism are on the rise as a result of international migration. Currently, an increased number of limited Polish speaking pupils – both foreign-born and Polish returned migrant students – attend Polish public schools at all levels.

The Wielkopolska region has recently seen a rapid increase of foreign-born pupils in primary and secondary schools. During the 2015/2016 school year there were 585 foreign-born pupils in public schools in the region. Since then the number increased fivefold and at the beginning of the 2018/2019 school year it reached 3,200 pupils. The number of foreign-born students continues to grow as students arrive and enrol in schools during the entire school year.

Despite the growth of the foreign-born student population, Poland remains linguistically and ethnically quite homogeneous. The 3,200 pupils represent only 0.6 percent of the total of 476,800 pupils in Wielkopolska. As a result, the region has not had well-developed multicultural and global education programs. Short-term, project-based approaches to multicultural education have been established, but have not been institutionalized.

Polish Language Education Policy

Public education for children age seven to 18 is free and compulsory in Poland. According to the regulations issued by the Ministry of Education on August 23, 2017, children with no facility in the Polish language or with limited knowledge of Polish are entitled to two hours of extracurricular Polish language instruction a week for one school year. Children are also entitled to receive support from bilingual and bicultural assistants. However, this practice is hardly ever implemented due to lack of resources and lack of willingness to organise such assistance. Some schools started preparatory classes for foreign-born pupils, yet these programs have not been evaluated so far and it is difficult to ascertain their efficacy and effectiveness.

Public school curricula are focused almost exclusively on Polish history and culture, including the Catholic faith, while global education, including diversity and religious pluralism is absent from textbooks and lesson plans. Pursuant to the agreement signed by the Polish government and the Vatican in 1993, the clergy has a right to establish Catholic religion classes in public schools (K-12), three-day long religious retreats during the Holy Week leading to Easter, as well as celebrate Catholic masses at the beginning and the end of each school year. Furthermore, the educational system in Poland neither includes multilingualism and multiculturalism into the school curricula nor does it offer novel and creative pedagogical approaches. Parents and students have limited possibilities of participating in decisions concerning educational curricula and school activities. School directors have a decisive voice whether a school or an individual class participates in any extracurricular activities, including multicultural or global education programs. This situation results both in pedagogical challenges as well as cases of discrimination against Polish Language Learners (PLLs) or children of different ethnic or religious backgrounds even if they are native speakers of Polish.

Regional Attempts to Solve Existing Challenges

There is a genuine interest – fueled by a rapid increase of foreign-born students – in creating novel strategies and creative projects within the Wielkopolska educational system to meet the learning needs of these students. Recently, the Teaching Training Center hired two new staff members to:

- Train teachers of PLLs;
- Develop strategies to facilitate integration of foreign-born pupils in schools and classrooms; and
- Develop multicultural curriculum to be implemented in September 2019.

Given these new developments, the NOVAMIGRA team at the Adam Mickiewicz University organized a brain storming session with experts, policy-makers, and practitioners from the Education Department of the Poznań City Council, the Board of Education in Poznań, *Bilingualism Matters Initiative* at Adam Mickiewicz University, Teachers Training Centers in Poznań, Piła, and Kalisz, as well as staff member from the Wielkopolska Province Office in Poznań. The brain storming session was held on March 13, 2019 under the theme of **Multicultural education in Wielkopolska**.

The brainstorming session was preceded by two preparatory meetings: the EDUTEC Educational Congress in Poznań (February 28-March 1, 2019) and a discussion with experts from the Teachers Training Centre (March 11, 2019). The preparatory meetings resulted in the publication of a document entitled „Position of the 3rd EDUTEC National Congress of Education, *Safe Haven in a Multicultural School*.” This document served as a basis for the brain storming session. The participants discussed the newly released document as well as existing educational strategies and programs aimed at Polish Language Learners (PLLs) and planed future actions.

As a result of these activities and discussions, a Working Group on Multicultural Education was established with plans to meet and work together in the near future.

Policy and Programmatic Recommendations

The above-mentioned activities are all excellent initiatives, but they must be followed by detailed policy and programmatic guidelines. The recommendations below are predominantly aimed at local and regional entities. However, some should be also implemented at the level of the Ministry of Education. We indicate in parentheses the target groups. We begin with policy recommendations, followed by programmatic suggestions.

- 1) **Educational policies should be informed by the “best interest of the child” principle enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of 1989.** Poland is the signatory of the CRC. The CRC emphasizes that education is a right and must be available without **discrimination**. This is particularly important for foreign-born children who might be excluded from educational opportunities and discriminated based on their race, ethnicity or religion. Education must address **the best interests** and ongoing **development** of the whole child. This means that, in addition to being child-centered, education is much more than attention to cognitive development. It is also concerned with the child's social, emotional, and physical development. It also calls for more than the conventional integrated approach. Rather education must be conceptualized from the child's point of view and with an understanding of the inter-related nature of the child's needs which

vary according to level of individual development. Again, this is of particular import when educating migrant or refugee children whose education and development might have been disrupted.

- 2) **Educational policies at all levels should incorporate special provisions for Polish Language Learners**, regardless of whether they are foreign-born or Polish returned migrant students. This directive should come from the Ministry of Education and should be passed down to regional, municipal, and school levels. It needs to be enforced and monitored.
- 3) **Polish as a second/foreign language** should be taught by specialized teachers with appropriate pedagogical preparation. This is the ideal and it might take some time and additional resources to develop training for teachers of Polish as a Second/Foreign Language. [all levels]
- 4) **Teachers interfacing with PLLs in other classes** should also be encouraged to improve their qualifications to meet the special needs of these students. [all levels]
- 5) **In addition to knowledge and skills, the curriculum should include a focus on values.** There are some core values that are global in nature. For example, every child must understand what is meant by human rights and how these can be described and acknowledged in simple language using examples that are common in that child's daily life and experience. Among these values is the importance of respect, which must be obvious in peer interactions with children of different racial, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. Other global values include honesty and responsibility. Another key value is the right to privacy, which must be understood by children and respected by teachers and other educational leaders.
- 6) **Preparing a starter pack** will provide a welcoming introduction of the students and their parents, and will efficiently and cohesively pass on the most important information about the school, the curriculum, and the school's expectations. [regional and local level]
- 7) **Preparing the class to meet students of different nationalities, including:**
 - a. gathering information about the culture and religion of the new student/s and discussing these in class;
 - b. sensitizing students to the challenges the newcomers might experience as a result of migration;
 - c. enabling students to freely ask questions, express doubts and emotions in a judgment-free atmosphere; and
 - d. creating space for proposing their own initiatives in order to create a sense of shared responsibility for the good reception of a new person. [all levels]
- 8) An **appropriate support system** for the newcomer students should be developed to prevent isolation and discrimination of migrant children. This support should include, at minimum, the following:
 - a. provision of a friendly atmosphere;
 - b. preliminary needs assessment; and
 - c. monitoring progress and unanticipated challenges.

This system should support newcomer students both psychologically and pedagogically, including assisting them in learning Polish and others subjects, as well as explaining school rules and teaching culturally and socially appropriate behavior. This support should be based, among others things, on cooperation with cultural and peer assistants. [national and regional level]

- 9) **Classes on anti-discrimination and intercultural education for both teachers and students should be prepared and implemented.** These classes should aim at overcoming stereotypes and prejudices and should endeavor to build respect and tolerance. Such classes should include knowledge about discrimination mechanisms, develop skills and attitudes enabling discrimination prevention, and teach respect for the dignity, freedom, and equality of all. On one hand, these workshops should sensitize teachers and students to cultural differences, but also to indicate similarities and the fact that the experience of being a migrant is only one of many components of one's identity. [all levels]
- 10) An effective tool for the exchange of good practices should be the **creation of teacher cooperation networks and establishment of cooperation with institutions supporting multiculturalism.** [national and regional level]
- 11) **Guidelines** for providing the outlined support and assistance should be **standardized** and the **implementation of assistance** should be **monitored** on an ongoing basis. [national and regional level]

About NOVAMIGRA

Several, partly interconnected crises have profoundly challenged the European project in recent years. In particular, reactions to the arrival of 1.25 million refugees in 2015 called into question the idea(l) of a unified Europe. What is the impact of the so-called migration and refugee crisis on the normative foundations and values of the European Union? And what will the EU stand for in the future?

NOVAMIGRA studies these questions with a unique combination of social scientific analysis, legal and philosophical normative reconstruction and theory.

This project:

- Develops a precise descriptive and normative understanding of the current “value crisis”;
- Assesses possible evolutions of European values; and
- Considers Europe’s future in light of rights, norms and values that could contribute to overcoming the crises.

The project is funded with around 2.5 million Euros under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme for a period of three years.

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