

## **Intercultural education in a monocultural context: global and local dimensions of sensitive topics**

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**ABSTRACT:** The article critically engages in teaching intercultural education in Poland—a country that is to a great extent homogenous in ethnic or religious terms. It starts with a brief overview of the complicated nature of intercultural education, followed by a case study of how intercultural education is studied and researched in Poland in a top academic journal dedicated to intercultural education. Quantitative content analysis shows that intercultural education is generally approached and unrelated to the local Polish context. The only exception is the borderland type of intercultural education. This leads to a conclusion that teaching intercultural education without a context—i.e. real-life experiences—proves to be a challenge in monocultural schools.

**KEYWORDS:** monocultural school, Poland, intercultural education, global education, sensitive topics

### **INTRODUCTION**

Articles collected in this issue focus on sensitive topics in the context of global education. They critically engage with children and young people in school and out of school settings. Most of them are empirical studies that use qualitative and discursive methodologies. The countries covered include Germany, the Philippines, South Africa, Estonia, the Czech Republic and Central and Eastern Europe in general.

The first two articles cover the tertiary education setting. Marthinus Conradie presents department-specific pedagogies from a South African university that aim at decolonisation the relationship in academia. He analyses how teaching assistants man-

age their intersectional subjectiveness and engage whiteness using critical whiteness studies. Margaryta Rymarenko and Jekatyerina Dunajeva move over to a region with different experiences in diversity in education—namely to Eastern Europe. They explore how faculty members from East European universities approach diversity and how they interpret it, implement it, and manage it in their classrooms.

The following two articles take us to primary or secondary school. Heidi Maiberg and Alar Kilp discuss Estonian teachers' experiences discussing extremism in the classroom. According to their study, teachers discuss extremism mostly if their students initiate the topic. Moreover, they considered it was challenging to define extremism and interpret student reactions. Radek Vorlíček brings in the case of a Czech lower secondary school and examines the social and ethnic relations among six-graders of Czech and Roma ethnicity. The author analyses the role of ethnicity on intergroup relations and communication.

The final two articles in this section bring us to the more troubled and complex dimension of childhood studies. Karla Asuncion Morales analyses national and international legislation in the Philippines regarding protecting children engaged in armed conflicts. While these regulations aim to protect children, they provide only one framework that fails to understand “the multiplicity of childhoods and the complexities of war”. To better care for Filipino children involved in armed conflict, she envisions an approach more oriented towards children's rights. Marta Skrzypczak critically engages with the issue of children's participation in decision-making in the German context. While children's involvement is embedded in national legislation, it is often not practically implemented at childcare facilities. She advocates for collaborative leadership and participatory structures, which are essential for children and adults

A book review accompanies the issue on the Academic careers of women in men in the CEE context prepared by Weronika Molińska.

The areas covered by the articles represent different patterns of experiencing and engaging with other cultures and sensitive topics. Some countries are multicultural by default (Philippines, South Africa), some embraced multiculturalism only recently (Estonia, Germany), while others—compared to, e.g. West European countries—remain monocultural in ethnic or religious terms (Central and Eastern Europe). In this introductory article focusing on the critical approach, we engage with the last context—namely, teaching intercultural education in a country that is to a great extent homogenous in ethnic or religious terms. We will start with a brief overview of the complicated nature of intercultural education followed by a case study of how intercultural education is studied and researched in Poland – one of the Central and East European countries, and at the same time one of the most homogenous countries in Europe (until the Russian invasion on Ukraine and the 2022 refugee crisis).

### **THE COMPLICATED NATURE OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION**

In the context of school and non-school practice, non-academic definitions become crucial in building the identity of intercultural education (Nikitorowicz 2009; Szkud-

larek 2003). These definitions are determined by political documents as well as the activities of non-governmental organisations and other actors (educators – practitioners). In the area of the theory and practice of initiatives that are already implemented, we can observe an absence of universal and straightforward terms that reflect the educational sense and ideas, and which could be used by teachers in their efforts to transfer knowledge, skills, values and attitudes in the process of teaching. Today, global education is understood in multiple ways by those who implement education and develop teaching resources as well as activities promoting this type of teaching and learning. In school and non-school practice, this type of education is implemented as multicultural education, intercultural education, international education, developmental education, humanitarian education, education for tolerance, anti-discrimination education, education about human rights, European education, global developmental education, etc. The problematic nature of the term, the unclear scope and the relationship with its constituent or related terms form a challenging climate in which we can undertake measured, systematised and comprehensive activities.

When considering the crucial actors of the education process: the teacher and the student, the challenge lies in comprehensive teaching and an adequate presentation of universal topics discussed within “global education” (whose important part is intercultural education). On the one hand, their richness and complexity ought to be accessible and understandable. On the other hand – they are presented as accurately as possible. Another dilemma appears in this context. Should global education be treated as a pedagogical innovation and implemented in general education as a separate subject called: “Global education in a knowledge-based society”? Or—as is the case now—should its content and topics be included (in line with the core curriculum) in subjects already taught at school: citizenship education, geography, history, ethics, culture studies or foreign languages? Although introducing a new subject would strengthen the importance of the content taught within global education, given the broad scope of topics and the overburdening of students with school subjects, it seems much easier to divide the content into subjects already implemented at school. The expectation that one teacher will have such a broad spectrum of knowledge (Räsänen 2010) and be up-to-date with all transformations taking place in the world with an interdisciplinary perspective seems too idealistic.

Among equally important elements are teachers’ knowledge and attitudes (and other actors responsible for implementing global education in school and non-school practice) towards implementing or even readiness to undertake topics of this type of education in the teaching process. Emphasizing the “elimination of xenophobia and prejudice as causes of destructive group cohabitation” (Nikitorowicz 2003: 915), global education, as it were, demands a message based on the concept of cultural relativism and neutralisation of excessive stereotypes and simplifications giving rise to distortions. Referring to the voices and statements of those whose reality is described and explained by the teacher is conducive to avoiding stereotypes. “(...) [S]earching for information about problems affecting countries of the South, we cannot omit opinions, reports and appeals of civic society organisations from these countries” (Wojtalik 2011: 9). Practice shows how many difficulties it poses. It is so because the content

of global education and its assumptions can be (and often are) interpreted through the prism of one correct civilisational, cultural and world-view context (including religious). Moreover, its content is transmitted as knowledge “about Others”, usually in a non-participative way, and so without the participation of individuals representing a particular country, culture or community. It would then be reasonable to carry out research diagnosing teachers’ needs (and not only theirs) and how this type of education is often implemented in Polish schools as “dry-run” education.

On the ground of pedagogical exploration, analysing the contexts in which global perspectives have essential influence on individuals and communities, intercultural education formulates the challenges it faces and its aims, showing the paths it can follow. For instance—through a deconstruction of the understanding of the world (also of itself), through indicating the systems of entanglement of practice in ideologies, concepts and worldviews (while being also affected by them), global education attempts to construct points of reference with the maximum value of objectivism, while being in itself a pluralistic trend.

Intercultural learning should be seen in the context of the overall preparation of students to live in a pluralistic society. So it seems appropriate to emphasize creating attitudes of intercultural sensitivity and teaching the civic and practical skills necessary to prepare young people for their future lives.

### **CHALLENGES RELATED TO INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN THE POLISH CONTEXT**

The implementation of intercultural (and wider: global) education in Poland, strictly connected to the presence of Poland in the European Union, is an embodiment of ideological postulates of education for sustainable development whose aim is to transform the learning process and educate conscious “global citizens” with the competencies (e.g. global awareness) to actively participate in “global civic society”. The basis for this message lies in The 2002 *Maastricht* Global Education Declaration, which is a peculiar global tool for the creation of European education policy remaining in the trend of globalisation. It argues that the education process “is not neutral in terms of world view, is not objective, unbiased or politically unengaged” (Jasikowska 2011: 97). As such, it is a challenge to education systems and bottom-up education activities in the globalised world of EU states. On the level of the Community, it is perceived as one of the available forces designed to lead to an evolution in understanding international developmental cooperation and to make the population aware of global interdependencies between countries of the Global North and Global South (Jasikowska 2011). On the local level, it is understood as a carrier of individual and social change (Babicki 2016).

When analysing the catalogue of obstacles and dilemmas in the implementation of intercultural education in Polish education practice, the very nature of this type of education comes to the forefront. Its nature is a source of several problems, barriers and controversies. The broad scope and complexity of issues addressed within global education is a particular challenge. It requires the cooperation of specialists

in different fields (both theoreticians and practitioners), which seems complicated and may not always lead to reaching a consensus. This results from the methodological dissonance and distinct analysis fields between academics (and within the academic environment) and practitioners.

The Polish Ministry of Education and Science defines global education as all educational activities shaping the attitudes of openness and solidarity, arousing curiosity about the world and initiating activities for others through the popularisation of knowledge about global problems—with a particular focus on developing countries. Understood this way, global education encompasses initiatives in developmental, intercultural and multicultural education, education for sustainable development, and education for peace. On the other hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses the term global education quoting the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe<sup>1</sup>, which explains the term as follows: “global education is education that opens people’s eyes and minds to the realities of the globalised world and awakens them to bring about a world of greater justice, equity and Human Rights for all” (The Maastricht Declaration 2002). Global education is a broader dimension of civic education, allowing people to understand the interdependencies between their own lives and the lives of other people around the world. Global education comprises the following elements: developmental education, education about human rights, education for permanent and sustainable development, peace education for conflict prevention and intercultural education.

When sensitising students to the problems affecting the contemporary world and its inhabitants, some educators use the term global education based on the definition developed by the Team for Global Education operating at Grupa Zagranica. The definition is officially accepted in educational practice in Poland by virtue of the agreement mentioned above on supporting the development of global education in our country. This education is based on such values as the dignity of a human being, justice and solidarity. Its important aspect lies in shaping attitudes and implementing active participation in social life through personal, conscious engagement (Grupa Zagranica 2011: 6–7). We must admit that despite the fact that the activities undertaken by Grupa Zagranica were a good move (activities aiming to introduce and apply a generally accepted definition of global education agreed upon in the intersectoral process initiated and coordinated by the group, as well as signing an agreement related to the term) when we look more closely at the process of developing the definition presently accepted; we will see a range of problems and challenges. They are connected, among other things, with the clarity and quality of the message, which calls the final result of this work into question.

Undertaking this type of activity and engaging such diverse environments to work on the definition deserves credit. However, the spectrum of institutions participating in it and the scarce representation of particular environments (particularly individuals from the Global South or the academic community—including the absence of

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<sup>1</sup> This definition is a modification of the definition of global education from the *Maastricht Global Education Declaration. European strategy framework for improving and increasing global education in Europe to the year 2012*. Another definition is cited by (DEEEP) Development Education Exchange in Europe Project.

scholars from the field of megatrends, conservation and ecology, migration studies and teacher training studies) give rise to a dilemma whether the results have, and will have in activities undertaken in the future, sufficient substantive and practical value.

There is an important element influencing the possibility of implementing intercultural education in school and non-school practices, namely the strong dynamics of social, cultural, political and economic processes that define its subjects. This, in turn, requires facing outdated knowledge lack of access to “first-hand” information, which translates to poorer social sensitivity. The necessity to constantly update knowledge in different areas and fields (e.g. politics, business, human rights) adequate to social, political and cultural changes, and differences in understanding and functioning in time and places around the globe, can be an important blockage in this area.

### INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN RESEARCH PRACTICE

The bulk of global studies, particularly intercultural studies in Poland, is vast and well-established. It emerged from the studies of borderlands, ethnicity, and ethnography, which have been historically an important field of academic inquiry. We will analyse the scope of academic investigation related to intercultural education by reaching the only and most popular academic journal on this topic—*Edukacja międzykulturowa* (*Intercultural education*, ISSN 2299-4106). The journal is currently published twice a year and is indexed in CEJSH, ICI Journal Master List, and ERIH Plus. It has been awarded 100/200 points by the Ministry of Science and Education, which positions the journal as one of the most prestigious in Poland. The editorial board consists of the Faculty of Arts and Educational Sciences employees, the University of Silesia in Katowice.

All issues (13 in total) are published in Open Access online. They have been downloaded, and the titles and abstracts coded using the MAXQDA programme for qualitative analysis. We have coded around 25% of the data individually and then developed a joint code system. We have analysed only research articles, so other text entries (introduction to the issue, reviews, conference proceedings, etc.) were not included in the final data set. The total sample consists of 191 articles with individual journals comprising from 10 to 20 articles. Most of the articles were written in Polish (161), while 30 were written in foreign languages, mostly in English.

The articles are divided into several thematic sections: articles, fieldwork reports, ethnic minorities, intercultural education abroad, a forum of young researchers, educational practice, and scientific centres. The sections with the most articles are articles (39), fieldwork reports (34), followed by educational practice (29), and forum of young scientists (28). The scope of the journal reflects well the diversity of approaches to intercultural education and balance between research and theory, as well as studies that focus on Poland and abroad. Most of the foreign authors and articles written in a language other than Polish focus on intercultural education abroad.

The decision about the article’s topic is usually of the author, even if sometimes there is a leading topic for a thematic section (e.g. Roma education, language education). The most frequent topics are presented in the table below:

THEME	CODE
<b>Concepts</b>	multiculturalism – 30; identity – 20; borderlands – 16; religion – 15; otherness – 11; values – 9; theoretical approach – 9; global issues – 7; nation – 5; history / heritage – 5, collaboration – 5
<b>Skills and methods</b>	intercultural education – 40; language – 18; arts – 12; teaching methods and programmes – 11; pedagogy – 8; Intercultural competence – 8; regional education – 6; dialogue – 6
<b>People in Poland / Poles – ethnicities</b>	Polish diaspora abroad – 10; Silesia / Silesians – 10; migrants in Poland – 6; Kashubia / Kashubians – 5
<b>People in Poland – places and demographic groups</b>	school – 20; teacher – 14; pupils – 11; students – 10; children – 9; marriage / family – 9; youth – 8; space / city – 8
<b>Regions abroad</b>	Czechs / Czech Republic – 17; foreigners / foreign Western countries – 15; Ukraine – 9; Roma abroad – 8; EU – 6; Slovakia – 5

Table 1. Distribution of topics according to the frequency (min. 5)

Source: Own elaboration 2022

The topics provide an overview of how intercultural education is researched in Poland. Most of the articles refer to intercultural education (15), multiculturalism (12), religion (9), identity (6) and global problems and challenges (5). In fact, many of these studies link intercultural education to multiculturalism or put it in a context of global problems and challenges. The educational practice covers methods of delivering intercultural content. Thus intercultural education (8) and multiculturalism (7) are intersections with arts (9), didactic methods and study programmes (6), located in the school context (4), and directed at teachers (3) and pupils (3). Intercultural education in the world mainly focuses on language (8), and the two countries studied most are the Czech Republic and Ukraine. Reports from own studies cover values (5) and the institution of family (6), borderlands (9), Polish diaspora (5), students (5) and teachers (5).

Considering this paper's topic, the following four key concepts related to intercultural education will be analysed: intercultural education, multiculturalism, borderland / regional education, and intercultural competence. The first two ones—treated sometimes as synonymous—provide the context of how intercultural education is understood. The borderland and regional education are the types of intercultural education implemented in Poland, while intercultural competence is a crucial skill in the globalised world.

Intercultural education is approached mostly through a theoretical lens – it refers to contemporary world problems, global influences, tolerance as an aim and value, as well as approaches to intercultural education according to Polish and foreign scholars. Some of the articles analyse tools and spaces where intercultural education should occur—mostly school is the place, and arts is the means. Multicultural education and

multiculturalism are navigated in a very similar manner—as a phenomenon, something that one can be ready for, or pedagogical inquiry. Multicultural education is only seldom presented through educational practice. It seems that there is a strong need to discuss intercultural or multicultural education to become a part of the global discourse. Still, most articles refer to the very concept without applying it to the local context. Taking into account the monocultural character of Polish society, the latter would be hard and—in a way—artificial.

Intercultural education in the Polish context is region-oriented, with the most significant academic centres in the biggest cities (Warsaw, Cracow) or in cities next to the borderlands (Bleszyńska 2011: 78). Borderlands (Pl. ‘pogranicze’) is a complex term that describes the processes occurring at territories located far from centres, inhabited or culturally influenced by different groups of people. Nikitorowicz (2014: 180–181) identified several types of borderlands:

(i) territorial—as a space inhabited by two or more different cultural groups usually defined in ethnic, ethnographic, linguistic, religious or national terms, and located at the peripheries, next to the border area;

(ii) cultural content-related—a set of norms, values, rites, and traditions that make it easier for the inhabitants of borderlands to live together;

(iii) interactional—which is about a willingness to meet each other, learn each other and respect each other. The social bond that is established is built on similarities and differences;

(iv) personal, internal—is about the self-perception and identity of people inhabiting borderlands.

Unlike intercultural or multicultural education regional education is much more practice-oriented. It refers to concrete cases of people who inhabit borderland regions of Podlasie, Kashubia, and Silesia. The articles cover case studies related to heritage, language, mutual perceptions, transborder cooperation etc. Even if some of the articles refer to the role or regional education or dimensions of regional education, they are either reports from fieldwork or cover educational practice.

Intercultural competence is one of the core competencies of global citizenship (Deardorff 2006). This competence is not only about culture-specific knowledge, or openness and respect to other cultures, but also about cultural self-awareness. Fernando Reimers (2009) writes about a “global competency”, defining it as knowledge and skills which people need to understand the contemporary flat world and to integrate many different fields, which will allow them to understand global events and create opportunities to solve them. Global competency also encompasses attitudes and a moral disposition, which enable peaceful, respectful and productive interactions with people from different geographical areas. Intercultural competence is only seldom a subject of articles published. It is mostly presented as an output of educational practice that can be achieved through arts, by children, or is an abstract must in the contemporary world. Only three articles were research reports, including two



about the Polish diaspora. It seems, therefore, as if intercultural competence was out of reach in the Polish school setting.

## CONCLUSIONS

Global education is analysed and defined in various ways—both by practitioners (educators) and scholars. In the academic literature on the subject, it is categorised in the development of new paradigms of knowledge, in theories of sustainable development, activities of civic education, education for democracy, education for peace, or it is treated as a grassroots educational offer allowing (at least in its assumptions) its recipients to deal with globalisation and its challenges (to a greater or lesser degree). This dynamic, evolving education promoting a holistic perspective of the world does it through a process leading to equipping learners with knowledge, skills and competencies that are necessary to live (on the local and global level) in a world of mutual, complicated dependencies, in which the challenges and problems faced by contemporary man go beyond national and cultural borders (Popkiewicz 2012).

Education has always had to respond to the challenges faced by people in the world, staying in relationships with other people and nature, helping them find themselves in it and manage it (Nikitorowicz 2020). This was and is its main assumption. In the age of globalization, its task is to prepare individuals and societies to function in a world of global connections and dependencies, global challenges and threats. To face these global challenges, there has to be a school system able to provide students with relevant knowledge, skills and understanding of the surrounding world. The crucial element for such understanding is learning by experiencing how these global connections and flows actually work. This task is particularly hard to achieve in a monocultural Polish school with non-contextual teaching (Markowska-Manista 2021).

Based on the analysis of the themes of scientific articles in one of the key academic journals for researchers and educators teaching future teachers and pedagogues, we found clues that are crucial for understanding the context in which global—especially intercultural education is taught in Polish schools. We can notice the polysemous character of global education in the Polish context. The analysis showed that it is strongly embedded locally, regionally, and nationally in the context of national, ethnic, and cultural borderland transformations. Perhaps the borderland is our strength - the strength of global education in Poland. Further exploration should serve to analyse how activities for global education are implemented in the context of cultural borderlands, educational discourses and political borderlands where liberal and conservative worldviews clash.

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An ongoing project, Sensiclass, has inspired the Special Issue: *Tackling Sensitive Topics in a Classroom*—Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education, Grant Agreement No. 2019-KA203-05. The project is led by the University of Tartu (Estonia) with partners from the Central European University (Hungary/Austria), University of Hra-

dec Králové (Czech Republic), and SGH Warsaw School of Economics (Poland)—four higher education institutions located in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

The project aims to prepare educational materials and strategies for teaching sensitive topics in the CEE context. The Special Issue, which came out after a call for papers, includes articles designed by the team members and authors from other institutions and countries. It only indicates that tackling and researching sensitive topics is a globally important issue.

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