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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Approaching Europe: needs and barriers of children and adolescents

Dorota Misiejuk
Uniwersytet w Bialymstoku (Poland)

Every culture, through its socialisation processes, delivers a sense of identity to its next generation. The purpose is to include individuals in the cultural system - to create the category 'we'. The size and extent of this category depends on the social construction of that society; currently the European community is attempting to construct a European 'we'.

Identity is a central category of humanity: identity construction is both a social and an individual processes. Such construction is based on continuous changes in the surrounding society and its cultural context, although there may be some divergence between individual and social identities. This paper discusses cultural elements and plots the social meaning in the creation of individual identity through socialisation. What are the cultural elements in the system of social meanings that contribute to - or detract from - the construction of a new category of 'we' for children and adolescents in the north-east Poland? What are the needs and expectations of individuals who are building an identity? Which cultural elements are incorporated into children's social meaning?

It is difficult to talk about identity in children of pre- and primary school age, as Erikson's suggests that identity as a category only appears in adolescence, and is the effect of socialisation in previous phases of growth. The earlier years can be considered as a period which prepares the individual to answer the question 'who am I?' Symbolic interactionism suggests that a child looks at itself, and qualifies itself, through the prism of information from the environment. The individual can interpret the symbols delivered from preceding generations. This can take place in two kinds of communication processes: the face to face contact which in the primary family group, and secondly communication with the generalised 'other'. This relationship is symbolic, abstract and imagined as relating to society as a whole. From this, the child discerns possible influences on his/her life and environment. The same processes form the background to the question 'who are the 'others''?

Poland is an extremely homogeneous country, with national minorities (ethnic or religious) only of about 2.5 to 4% of the population. There is very little migration to Poland, and only in the larger cities. This gives very few possibilities for contact with the 'other', and creates in different social categories a national symbolical category.

Children move into the school system from primary socialisation groups , joining organised education with its own aims, targets, goals and rules. From the viewpoint of symbolic interactionism and identity formation, the child absorbs information, builds up a picture of itself through the eyes of others, accepting and internalising the opinions, ideas and manners of previous generations. This creates a specific social situation in identity creation.

The arguments presented in this paper about the possibility of constructing 'we' come from various investigations of children and young people's socialisation in north-eastern Poland, comprising qualitative and quantitative research carried out over several years, mainly by students of the Pedagogy and Psychology Department of the University of Bialystok, and directed by author.

1. Younger children perceive differences in the categories of themselves and strangers, and have a distinct tendency to favour their own category. This is probably an effect of stereotyping learned from their primary social groups in the family. Information is usually constructed in a way that people are seen as better or worse, friends or enemies, like us (we) or strangers (foreigners), with the implication that it would be best if all people were similar to oneself. Such stereotypes are strongly rooted in the subconscious of children and influence on their perception and estimation of the surrounding world.

2. Children's knowledge about other ethnic groups and cultures is low and stereotyped. This knowledge comes from children's books where everything is white or black, television programmes and the internet – the latter two not controlled by older generations. Children create their own values, and the image of the other is simplified, accidental and strongly coded.

3. The comparatively low level of knowledge about the other, together with the tendency to favouritism their own category in relation to the other, show a lack of empathy for the feelings and meanings of others.

4. Children identify their own shortcomings and advantages, but their negative perceptions of others are subjective and irrational responses.

Adolescents' categories of needs and expectations in socialisation centred on stereotypes and attitudes toward the other. While younger children had phenomenological constructs, adolescents constructions were declaratory. Quantitative research on representations of multiculturalism in the region and the declared identities of young people showed:

1. Low correlations of modification of attitudes by young people faced with the other.

2. Distinct and strong declarations for homogeneity and commonality, achieved through a single religion and culture – 'it would be better if there were no differences'. There was a tendency to identify religion and nationality as important, and to use religion as a primary social category: confession becomes the feature accrediting membership of the nation. Boys frequently (around 80%) chose membership of the category of 'mankind' as most important: this may be a wish to blur differences and a desire to be free of them: but. the next most chosen category was nationality. Categorising oneself as European as an identity was chosen only by 8%: this category is not yet important for adolescents.

3. There were distinct strongly declared attitudes of tolerance when there was a large distance from the other groups, or where there was no expectation of obligation. The level tolerance was much lower to groups that were closer and with whom there was prolonged contact. There are clear stigmatised groups, for whom tolerance is low, independent of contact – the Jews and Roma. There was a change in the stereotype of the Germans, from negative to affirmative. Young people's declarations about their relation to the other, when these were autochthonous ethnical minorities and emigrants were neutral towards Byelorussians, Ukrainians and Lithuanians nut negative towards Russians and the Roma. The idea of 'doing short-term good' towards emigrants and refugees was more frequent, but around 17% denied any obligation to help them. Proposals for long-term help and inclusion for refugees in Polish society met strong resistance from the young people, who said that this would

demoralise the refugees and 'accustom people to living at somebody else's cost'. Positive support for long-term help came only from boys at lycée level of general education in Polish secondary schools.

4. The level of education led to very different interpretations of reality and social interaction between general education lycée schools and professional schools:

    *   young people from the lycées had an anticipation of social reality and interaction in the area of convictions and attitudes. Those from the professional schools showed an inclination to actively realise anticipated behaviours.

    *   young people obtain information about 'the other' came from different sources: those from the lycées from watching television programmes, reading books, newspapers and magazines, and those from professional schools from family members and their peer group. Both had a completely unsatisfactory knowledge about the common history of Polish and Byelorussian, Roma and Jewish minorities. Those from the lycées appeared more tolerant to 'the other', and more willingly to see representatives of ethnic minorities in their own environment, than did the young people from the professional schools. Lycée pupils more often said they supported activity to make minorities more popular and to consider their rights of minorities, and in seeing regarding Byelorussian or Jewish colleagues as neighbours. They thought that creating something together depended on individual skills, not by the groups to which one belonged. The young people from professional schools identified themselves only with the group category: 'I will not allow him to go canoeing with me because …', ' I do not like these races …', 'I do not want to have anything in common with them', '…they are thieves and cheats', 'I don't trust them'.

School is an important place for socialisation, where children learn to function in peer-groups, to recognise and accept the obligations and norms of society, construct her/his own system of values and develop personal aims for the future. Civic attitudes are shaped to a large degree in school. Education provides the manners and qualities for participation in public life. One of the basic tasks of the school is the formation of social attitudes, and of the expression of individual identity. It seems to be *sine qua non* to treat categories of group membership by context rather than by classification. This allows the individual to function in many groups, and opens channels to building individual cultural identity. Intercultural education is an interdisciplinary process favouring acceptance, empathy and constructive, harmonious relations between people from different cultures. School should aim to make many-sided personal development possible.

In forming their personal identity, people form a generalised idea of themselves and of where they belong, an affirmative idea of themselves - and also of others. Problems with cultural identity arise when children meet systems of values other than those known from their experience of their own cultural group (usually their family), and if they grow up in a mono-cultural society. Work on cultural identity should be seen as building the self-worth of every child, and helping them answer the question 'to which groups do I belong?'.

Intercultural education is grounded in living in a multicultural society. Schools should initiate openness towards diverse environments and teach self-acceptance. It is important for school to help children understand the variety of cultures, and to sensitise them to

dissimilarities, which are the basis of different opinions and ideology. The aim of intercultural education is not to celebrate multiculturalism in an optimistic spirit but a challenge to identify areas of separateness and union to create consciousness of meaning (Misiejuk, 1999).

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