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Is the xenophobia of Slovenian society reflected in teachers' attitudes towards migrant and Romany students?

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Research studies show that there had been a certain level of intolerance in Slovenia, even before independence in 1991, and that this intolerance has increased since then (Medvešek, Vrečer, 2004). Slovenians are especially intolerant towards migrants from former Yugoslavia and towards the Romany people.[1] These are two very different groups. Romanys are generally uneducated or poorly educated, mostly unemployed and facing enormous housing problems. The Slovenian government makes a distinction between Romany who migrated to Slovenia many generations ago (natives) and those Romany who came to Slovenia only a few decades ago or later (non-natives). The status of two-thirds of the latter is not legalised (2003, Letter to EERC). The native Romany are recognised as a special ethnic community and not a minority. Their situation and special rights should be regulated by the Constitution, however, this has not yet happened. Migrants from former Yugoslavia, on the other hand, are a diverse group. Among them are Albanians, Bosnians, Montenegrins, Croatians, Macedonians and Serbs, most of who migrated to Slovenia in the 1970s for economic reasons. Even though their level of education was no lower than that of Slovenians, (Mežnarič, 1986, p174) they were mostly employed in lower level jobs. Another major wave followed the recent war in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Migrants have no constitutional or legal symbols of political identity, but have all human rights. About 20% of migrants do not hold Slovenian citizenship, most of them being from former Yugoslavia (Urejanje, 2004, p4).

If one of the criteria, that reveals the attitude of a government towards groups such as those described above is how it awards citizenship, then the information above clearly shows that in Slovenia the attitude is negative. The general atmosphere in the Slovenian society is one of xenophobia, stereotyping, prejudice, stigmatisation and marginalisation. Such feelings are partly the result of actual differences, and partly based on various fears among Slovenians that, for example, migrants are taking their jobs and that their habits are harmful to Slovenian children and the purity of Slovenian culture and heritage. There are examples of primary schools in Slovenia which have been almost entirely 'cleansed' of ethnic Slovenian children, the result of Slovenian children being transferred to other schools because their parents' fear that their child will not receive enough attention and encouragement from the teacher and will be exposed to aggression and bullying by non-

[1] According to the last census in 2002, there are 16.97% people living in Slovenia who do not describe themselves as Slovenian while 12.3% of the population reported other languages than Slovenian as their mother tongue. Among them, only 0.2% use Italian as their mother tongue and 0.4% Hungarian, the two ethnic minorities living on the territory of Slovenia with special rights and symbols of their political identity. A further 0.2% described themselves as native speakers of the Romany language. 2.7% of the population did not answer the question about their mother tongue which means that the rest are largely native speakers of the languages spoken in former Yugoslavia. Unofficially, the number of people whose native language is not Slovenian is higher: the unofficial number of the Romany people is 0.5% of the population.

Slovenians. Slovenian parents also show intolerance towards Romany children. This paper presents how the Slovenian school system treats migrants from former Yugoslavia and the Romany, and how the Slovenian teachers view these children and their schooling.

School Legislation

The Slovenian school system only allows special ethnic schools for the ethnic minorities (in other words, not for Romany children). The government gives some concessions to Romany children (such as one-to-one and group classes, fewer children per class, funding for school lunches, textbooks and excursions). In some schools Romany children are taught in separate classes, and in others in mixed classes. The proportion of Romany children in schools with an adjusted program is seven times higher than the Slovenian average. Their school results are significantly below average, and many drop out of primary school before Year 9. Questions addressing their education generally revolve around their assimilation in mainstream culture, rather than integration, which would give them an opportunity to practice and develop their language, culture and ethnic identity.

By law, children of foreigners do not need to meet any special requirements to enrol in primary school in Slovenia. In their first year they are entitled to two hours of one-to-one or group lessons, and six centres in Slovenia provide Slovenian language classes. Teachers with such children are required to prepare an individual program for each child (Urejanje, 2004, p7). All schools can organise additional after-hour classes, but this is usually not enough either for these children or for all others of non-Slovenian background, and there are examples of schools resorting to registering such children as having special needs, in order to secure additional funding for their schooling.

Foreigners and children of Slovenian citizens of non-Slovenian background have a right to be taught their native language and culture. This right can be exercised if the country of origin and Slovenia agree a special protocol regulating such classes, which is just to show how much these children are really considered ‘our’ children. Native language classes can also be offered as an option, but this happens very rarely. Formally, Romany children are not even granted this much.

The objectives of the education system in Slovenia (Solska, 1996, p10) guarantee the optimal development of each individual and subscribe to tolerance: but all children are required to accept the Slovenian language as the language of expression and to develop an awareness of their Slovenian ethnicity. The objectives do not refer to ‘native language’ and are concerned only with the Slovenian language; equally, they are not concerned with any other ethnicity but Slovenian. The Slovenian nation has thus a privileged position per se, which means that children who are not Slovenian have no opportunity to uphold their own culture and ethnic identity. The choice of topics in the syllabus shows a lack of interest in the cultures that coexist in the region, and looks rather to value cultures beyond the Slovenian borders.

Research

In late 2003 and early 2004 we asked a representative sample of class and subject[2] primary school teachers to complete a questionnaire aimed at discovering teachers' attitudes towards various groups of children in primary school[3]. This paper presents partial results about teachers' views of teaching migrants and Romany children their native language and Slovenian.

Table 1: Teaching the migrant and Romany children

	MIGRANTS		ROMANY	
	Subject	Class	Subject	Class
Children…[4] should be from the beginning taught under the same conditions as Slovenian children.	57.0%	62.1%	63.3%	65.7%
Children … should complete a course in the Slovenian language before enrolling in Slovenian school.	35.5%	28.7%	26.6%	25.7%
Children … should be as often as possible taught on one-to-one basis, separated from other children in the class.	6.5%	8.7%	7%	6.9%
Children … should be taught in a separate class.	1.0%	0.5%	3.1%	1.7%

About one tenth of teachers chose segregation as the preferred teaching method, as seen in responses to the last two statements. Most teachers agreed that children should be taught from the beginning under the same conditions as Slovenian children. When we asked teachers what they understood by 'the same conditions', they explained they included the same choice and inclusion as for all children; efforts to make the teaching matter understandable to all; additional hours of the Slovenian language provided when a child was qualified as a child with special needs. At one school, teachers thought there was a need for program and syllabus adjustments to reflect the children's cultural differences.

The next statement, which received around a third agreement, concerns a Slovenian language course which children should complete before enrolling in Slovenian school. It could be interpreted as awareness of teachers that a child with poor Slovenian will find it hard to follow lessons, and this will lead to poor results in other subjects. The Slovenian school legislation does not allow for such language courses.

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[2] Primary school in Slovenia takes nine years, children start school at the age of six. School is divided into three three-year triads: the first three years are taught by class teachers, the last three years by subject teachers and the second triad is taught by a combination of both.

[3] The questionnaire is a part of a larger research project titled 'Fairness and Justice in Educational Systems - Comparative Aspect (core research project by the Ministry of Education and Sport), project leader Mojca Pe_ek _uk.

[4] Insert "Migrants" or "Romanys" as needed.

Table 2: Migrant and Romany children learning their native language and Slovenian.

	MIGRANTS		ROMANY	
	Subject	Class	Subject	Class
…[5] should make an effort and speak Slovenian with children at home as often as possible	45.3%	53.7%	34.5%	57.9%
… should speak with their children in their own language, children will learn Slovenian in their environment, in day-care centre and in school	35.3%	21.4%	30.4%	15.7%
… should at home, in day-care centre and in school learn both languages	19.4%	24.9%	31.5%	24.2%
language of instruction … in day-care and in school should be their native language and they should learn Slovenian as a foreign language	/	/	3.6%	2.2%

When we asked teachers to interpret these results, some explained that it was up to each family to decide in what language its members should communicate. Others thought it was normal that these children were required to use Slovenian in school, as the language of the majority. There seemed to be a general expectation that the family should prepare their child for school in the Slovenian language. Parents could best fulfil this duty by speaking Slovenian to their children. It is doubtful whether teachers understand that parents who have such an attitude towards their own mother tongue might do more harm than good: firstly, because they themselves do not have a good command of Slovenian, and could pass this on to their children; secondly, using Slovenian at home could affect the quality and quantity of their communications. Studies indicate that if a child experiencing difficulties with the language of his environment is not given an opportunity to develop his or her own native language in an elaborated code, he or she will find it even harder to cope with the language of the environment, and this therefore affects achievement in all other school subjects. Finally, migrants and Romany people might do more harm than good by communicating at home in Slovenian, as this way encourages assimilation into the culture of the majority, and denies their child a chance to cultivate and develop her or his own cultural identity.

The statement that was second most preferred by subject teachers was that migrants should speak with their children in their native language, while their children would learn Slovenian in a day-care centre or in school. This reply reflects teachers' belief that migrants should keep their native language to the private sphere.

Other groups of teachers chose the third statement as their second preference, but only marginally. Just over a fifth of Slovenian teachers agree with this concept. Taking into account that 'the key element of international protection of ethnic minorities... is to create conditions in which the minority languages can be used, maintained and developed,' (Roter, 2004, p238), we can conclude that this is the most desirable concept from the perspective of various international documents. It is also the most desirable concept from

[5] Insert "Migrants" or "Romanys" as needed.

the child's perspective. Many studies indicate that bilingual children achieve better school results if they learn not only the language of their environment but also their native language. A child who does not learn concepts in his own language cannot grasp them in the language of the environment, which becomes an impediment to intellectual development. In the case of Romany children, the problems are even more complex. Not only do they not speak Slovenian well, but 'on entering school the Romany children bring with them a completely different "knowledge"... They have different thinking patterns and habits which often make their integration in the institutionalised school environment much harder' (Strategija, 2004, p13). It is therefore possible that the Romany children do need a transitional form of segregated classes, in which it would be easier to pay more attention to their specific problems. However, such classes would need to be implemented very carefully and should aim to facilitate integration as quickly as possible. The current discussion in Slovenia concerns such classes, although legislation abolished them in academic year 2003/04 (*ibid*, p11).

Responses to question 1 show more teachers thought that migrant children from the former Yugoslavia needed a Slovenian language course than did the Romany children: this was contrary to our expectations, since the Romany language and culture have less in common with Slovenian than other Slavonic languages spoken in other parts of former Yugoslavia. It is also surprising that subject teachers were more inclined to choose answer 3 in question 2 in the case of Romany children than they were for migrant children. Does this mean that their attitude is more tolerant, or is it that they come in less contact with Romany people, and therefore find it easier to be more tolerant towards them? To investigate this, we looked at the differences in the answers between the teachers who had experience of working with these children and the teachers who had not. We found differences in the answers given by subject teachers, but only with reference to migrant children. Responding to question 1 (chi-square=7.908, df=3, p=0.048), those teachers with experience of working with migrant children most frequently suggested that all children should be taught in the same under the same conditions, whilst teachers without such experience were more inclined to suggest that such children needed a Slovenian language course. Subject teachers with experience of work with migrant children were, in question 2 (chi-square=17.163, df=2, p=0.000) considerably less likely to choose (14.8%) answer 3 than those without such experience (44.1%). The former most frequently chose answer 1 (45.7%) followed by answer 2 (39.5%). These differences seem to indicate that subject teachers have become, through their experience with migrants, even more convinced that migrants should assimilate while practicing their culture and language in the private sphere of their family and home.

Conclusion

In any society reactions towards minority cultures are closely related to the state's attitude towards minorities. As we have shown, Slovenia's attitude towards Romany people and migrants from former Yugoslavia is negative. This is reflected in the formal structure of the school system, which is in need of new approaches to the education of these groups: we suggest these might include introducing Slovenian language courses, accepting Slovenian as a second language, providing classes in native languages, and in some cases even transitional forms of segregated classes. Negative attitude towards Romany and migrant peoples can be seen in the answers given by many teachers. Teachers who say that in their work they do not distinguish between children because of their ethnic background

in fact generate injustices. How can this be overcome? From the children's perspective, school should provide a multicultural experience and encourage them to think about different cultures and concepts of life. However, this can only be achieved if teachers themselves are committed to multicultural37 education. How do we train teachers in this direction? According to Paccione's analysis (2000), in their initial education and training teachers should first gain experiences which would make them understand that differences between different cultures and ethnic groups exist, so that the future teacher becomes sensitive to multicultural problems. They then need experiences which will make them think about xenophobia, intolerance and inequality at the theoretical level. Finally, they need to experience situations which will have a transforming effect. Such a set of learning experiences will help future teachers practice tolerance and non-discrimination. We recognise that this level will be the hardest to achieve, but it should be given most emphasis in the training period. Only teachers who have undergone such a transformation can pass it on to their students, and thus break the vicious circle of reproducing inequality and intolerance.

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