

ANTIPREJUDICIAL EDUCATION IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

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Abstract: One of the most important condition of successful implementation of multicultural education is the wide campaign aimed at combating prejudices. Prejudices are the main obstacles of successful implementation of multicultural principle in the life of the Slovak society. The prejudices create an important obstacle to healthy interpersonal relations – moral deficit manifesting itself in condemning and consequent non-objektive judgement of different people as well as in social life phenomena.

Key words: prejudices, social-cultural aspects, multiculturalism, multicultural training and education

It's a paradox that humankind in the 20th century gained considerable intercultural experience – after local war conflicts many people keep migrating from war and crisis areas; economic and work mobility is booming, modern technologies and multinational societies have contributed to globalization and cultural exchange significantly – and despite all these facts, the end of the millennium brought a variety of extremist movements and streams whose common signs are intolerance and ignorance, and their clear aims are to discriminate against other groups or communities, or act against them. These are the reasons why the spread of democratic ideas and principles and the support of tolerance in our society face obstacles which at the time of information technologies and technological “miracles” appear to be atavisms which humankind, as well as individuals, have carried in themselves and with them for decades. Under the surface of this bias, intolerance, malice and even extremism are prejudices.

In general, the term prejudice is most often defined “*as a fixed, emotionally biased attitude aimed at certain objects or people*”(Prucha, 2004, s. 109) Prejudices are also defined as *manifested values* (Allport, 1962). They are harmful, because they are aimed at another person, a group of people, but can also be aimed at oneself (the author of prejudice).

The word *prejudice* itself expresses in its stem that opinions on situations or states are created before these are evaluated on a rational basis – the judgement is formed before the situations or states are evaluated sensibly. In his scientific works, David Goleman(1997,2000) proved that in critical situations, when evaluating „ *unknown situations* ,“ emotions come before reason, intuition before the rational. Similarly, the same often applies for negative

emotions and feelings (anger, hostility, aggression, hatred); negative emotions may appear before a rational evaluation of the state or situation is made, even if one has not have any negative experience before. However, it is necessary to differentiate intuitively negative behaviour from negativism which is part of one's personality, *saturating hidden extrapunitive hostility of the bearer* (see J.Musil, 1999).

Even though the negative experience is non-existent, in contact with a certain object, phenomenon, or person, one behaves as if s/he has had such an experience. Even though there are prejudices against objects and some phenomena, from the point of view of multicultural education, prejudices against other people seem to be the most problematic. This is because prejudice is a kind of bias, a negative attitude adopted beforehand; this attitude is based on the fact that one expects negative (hostile or otherwise inadequate) behaviour of the other person or a group of people. It presents negative schemes that influence one's evaluation and behaviour. These, in contact with a person, cause defence mechanisms to start functioning and change the behaviour of the person considerably. The prejudiced person begins to act cautiously and defensively, sometimes even in a malicious and hostile way. Such behaviour results from persuasion whose implicit parts are anxiety and tension linked with the expectation of something unpleasant. It may be fear that mobilizes defence mechanisms of one's psyche.

Various social phobias are usually in the center of all negative manifestations and they are major obstacles to healthy human relationships. They are seen as a moral deficit leading towards refusal and the follow-up non-objective and unfair judgement of the person in question.. The social phobia is understood as a kind of one's fear of being discredited. In Slovakia, social phobias are very common, it is estimated *that 1 – 3 % of people suffer from this kind of phobia*(Praško, 1988)

Somewhere, deeply in their conscience, prejudiced people store in their long-term memory situations, states, objects or other people in context with a negative experience (negative content) which they relive again in similar situations. The main function of the anti-prejudicial education is to act against prejudices intentionally. The anti-prejudicial education is an inseparable part of multicultural education. From the above mentioned reasons, multicultural education is closely connected with the fight against prejudices and stereotypes in the society from the very beginning of its implementation. To some extent, these prejudices and stereotypes are negative part of cultural patterns of all social groups.

The adjective '*anti-prejudicial*' itself creates a dilemma: why something *against something*? Why do we not talk about education towards something, e.g. tolerance_ The

education towards tolerance is the education that develops and builds up a positive relationships. However, in case of prejudices one has to persuade the others that their attitudes and opinions are wrong and afterwards try to change the already existing and accepted views and patterns of behaviour. Therefore, the re-education is oriented towards the change of the existing opinions and patterns, as well as controversial or extreme viewpoints on other social groups. It focuses on the change of attitudes that are harmful to human relationships. “*Prejudices strengthen social discrimination*”(Musil, 1999, s. 99) and have a negative impact on the quality of life and intrapersonal relationships.

In contrast to prejudices, *stereotypes* are not always negative; occasionally, one comes across positive judgements: “golden Czech hands”, “with German punctuality” (Slovak sayings) and others. J. Prucha defines stereotypes as “*opinions about individuals, groups or objects which are stereotyped ways of perceiving and evaluating the reality*”(2001,s.36) Due to prejudices and stereotypes, phobias of unknown cultures, cultural and religious groups are spread in public (e.g. phobias of immigrants from Third World Countries, from Islamic countries, or countries of South-East Asia).

Prejudices, as well as stereotypes are an implicit part of human attitudes, and are considered harmless until they are expressed openly and actively by either individuals (verbal insults, accusations, bullying, restrictions) or groups displaying organized intolerance towards other individuals or groups. J. Prucha points to the fact that “*if somebody holds prejudices against another ethnic group or race, they are not guilty of any discrimination – this is only manifested by an action.*”(2001,s.37). Opinions and attitudes are not considered to be an offence or a manifestation of racism until they are presented and promoted in public. In general, the acceptance of other people’s opinions is considered to be a manifestation of democracy, even if the verbal aggression is aimed at other people. When talking about intolerance, one has to take into consideration the extent of tolerance of the rest of the community. Another question is where the borders of the freedom of speech are. In their hidden manifestation, prejudices spread in certain layers of society, as well as in youth sub-cultures, may become a time bomb in the society. Ignorance, tolerance towards prejudices and unreasonably negative attitudes approach may be a great mistake (as recent incidents in France prove). Therefore, it is very important to be interested in the opinions of pupils and students, and present multicultural attitudes to them at school.

According to their focus, these are the most common prejudices:

- *prejudices against the set of values of an individual or a group* (against people having various priorities and axioms, such as spiritual values, philosophic opinions and religious attitudes);
- *gender prejudices*, prejudices against the equality of genders, against women, or against people showing certain physical qualities; e.g. according to various criteria (hair colour, or the acceptance of women in certain professions such as teachers, nuns, etc.); against people on the basis of their sexual orientation (homosexuals);
- *nationalistic and racial prejudices against people belonging to a nation or an ethnic group*; racial prejudices make it impossible for a part of the majority community to judge members of other nationalities (ethnic groups, minority groups, races) objectively; the variety of cultures is not accepted and understood and certain features considered specific for a race or nation are assigned to all its members: e.g. all members of a nation are bone lazy; they are all liars, they all show a disposition towards crime; all members of a nation... are alcoholics; they are all... speculators; all members... of a nation are “rebels all member ... are extremely stingy, they are misers.
- *Prejudices schematizing the behaviour of a man as a member of a social group* – prejudices against institutions that are considered as non-objective; e.g. there is no justice in public schools; offices are corrupt; prejudices against the institution of marriage: e.g. a widespread prejudice that the work of a man is worth more than that of a woman. It is also typical that the behaviour of people involved in a marriage is schematized (stereotypes of parental and matrimonial roles): impractical, wasteful and naïve newly-married wives, embittered and strict wives, unpleasant mothers-in-law; offences tolerated by the public (violence against wives and children, alcoholism, etc.)

The Slovak society has much reserve in accepting differences (religious, national, ethnic), as well as in applying democratic principles – in ensuring equality of opportunities for all (regardless their gender, age and religion) - and developing a society emphasizing pro-social behaviour and consensus, i.e. overcoming bias – anti-prejudicial education leading to the acceptance of differences and varieties through multicultural education. From what has been stated, it is clear that the eradication of prejudices in a society is one of the most important conditions of the successful implementation of education towards tolerance and democracy in a society aiming at multicultural and multi-ethnic reality. Intentional actions against prejudices are part of anti-prejudicial education in Slovak schools. In this fight against

prejudices, teachers should emphasize the importance of social relationships through such forms as:

- supporting tolerance and democratic principles in class;
- supporting the self-assurance of individuals or groups threatened with prejudices by assigning them important tasks;
- encouraging pupils threatened with prejudices by engaging them in activities which are popular with them;
- raising pupils' awareness of themselves and teaching them self-assessing skills;
- increasing the prestige and status of disadvantaged pupils;
- supporting co-operation between pupils by increasing the frequency of cooperative and interactive strategies;
- supporting open communication in school;
- promoting cooperation between the school and pupils' families, as well as the local community;

Anti-prejudicial education is an inseparable part of multicultural education.

In democratic societies, it is the task of formal institutions to inform learners about the basic facts of other cultures. It should be part of various subject matters that pupils *learn to know various cultures, their traditions and values and in this way they are able to understand their own cultural identity, traditions and values, develop their sense of justice, solidarity and tolerance*" (Šindelářová, 2005, s. 11).

The implementation of multicultural elements in education and social life has, similarly to any other social activity, its drawbacks and limitations. In practical life one often encounters extreme opinions – rigid ones on the one hand (with ethnocentrism denying multiculturalism) and exaggerated application of multicultural education on the other hand. The rigidity is rather typical for Middle Europe, even though in liberal circles one already comes across trend that prevail in West-European cultural space. The extreme attitudes – in fear of cultural conflicts – cause people to take steps that restrict and oppress their own traditions. In effect, these attitudes are harmful to one's own culture. This causes justified concerns that both American and European school policies, in their efforts to apply multicultural principles, behave in an undemocratic way towards their own cultures. In everyday life, they often give up their own culture to the benefit of immigrants and by giving up their own traditions, they open the door to extremist movements.

For example, in France it is forbidden to have Christmas trees in schools (so that Arabian immigrants are not offended); at American universities they are not allowed to play songs whose lyrics include the word 'Christmas'. This is extreme caution that can cause that after some time people will lose their own traditions that create identity and the feeling of belonging – collective consciousness and historical roots. In order not to offend anyone, millions of Americans seem to be happy with not talking about Christmas that they celebrate and they will behave as if all kind of minority holidays (*Kwanza*, *Chanuka*, *Bodhi Day*, *Diwali*, *Ramadan*) were equally important. However, minorities are not forbidden to talk about their holidays, traditions and to celebrate them in public. It is thought-provoking that people who appreciate their own culture are considered to be prejudiced or biased. In some communities to say "Merry Christmas" to someone is a political act and not a friendly gesture (Piatak, 2005). This is also a reason why the application of multicultural education should have its limits.

We live in a highly technological society and in the era of information technology. We are well aware of the fact that no technology has ever improved human relationships. Technology cause men to be so busy that they hardly have any time to build up and develop human relationships and therefore, it is necessary to pay these relationships special attention in systematic work with pupils.

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