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## **TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: ETHNOCENTRIC AND ETHNORELATIVE WORLDVIEW IN SCHOOL CONTEXT**

### **Abstract**

In Serbian context many of the teachers are faced with a challenge of diversifying classrooms regarding the cultural background of the students. According to intercultural theory the way that people perceive cultural differences and their competence to effectively act in situations that involve different cultures is influenced by the intercultural sensitivity of a person. The main aim of this research is to answer the following questions: a) what kind of meanings participants assign to the notion of cultural difference; b) how do they perceive their professional and personal experience with cultural differences; c) how do they approach the teaching process in relation to perceived differences; and d) whether and in what way do they support minority students. The methodology for the presented research is structured according to the concept of Grounded Theory. For the purpose of this research, eight semi-structured interviews were carried out. All the data was analyzed by content analysis. The analysis of two different cases – ethnocentric and ethnorelative worldview translations to the school context are presented in details and discussed.

Keywords: teachers, cultural differences, intercultural sensitivity

### **Introduction**

Providing high quality education for students of different cultural, religious, ethnical background, language, socioeconomic status or other characteristics is one of the most important principles of multicultural education (Nieto, 2000; Gorski, 2009). This basic principle is incorporated in Law on the foundation of the education system (2009) in Serbia. The results of some research conducted in Serbia indicate that some of the minority groups are not included to the full extent into education system and in this respect the Roma minority stands out. Some authors emphasize that there are additional barriers for the educational inclusion of the Roma students, such as low expectations of the teaching staff regarding the fulfillment of high academic achievements (Baucal, 2006; Macura-Milovanović, Gera & Kovačević, 2010), lowering criteria in the process of grading (Baucal, 2006), insufficient fluency in Serbian language and the lack of possibility for education in their mother tongue (Macura-Milovanović, Gera & Kovačević, 2010). Every tenth pre-service teacher from the University of Belgrade believes that the Roma themselves are responsible for their poor position in the society, and one fourth of them do not see any form of discrimination towards Roma minority (Petrović, Vukičević & Kostović, 2010).

Teachers have the key role in the process of implementing educational strategies and policies into the educational practice. In the field of intercultural education there aren't many researches that are directed towards exploring the teachers' attitudes, beliefs and similar concepts regarding cultural differences in their classes. Certain

consensus has been achieved in this research domain about the following: students of the teaching faculties enter their studies with previously formed beliefs that are based on their own schooling experience; the beliefs teachers have are very resilient to the change; they adopt information that are consistent with their current beliefs, and to reject the incompatible ones (Kagan, 1992; Kane, Sandretto & Heath, 2002); the beliefs exist in the implicit and silent form and are hard to articulate (Kane, Sandretto & Heath, 2002).

Results of the research of teacher competencies in Serbian context suggest that teachers place high importance on competencies relating to equality, supporting the learning of all pupils and the promotion cultural diversity in the broadest sense (Pantić & Wubbels, 2010). Another research in Serbian context concerning the issue showed that teachers themselves emphasize following competencies as central for inclusive education: positive attitudes towards inclusion, tolerance, and understanding of differences, capacity to create a pleasant and positive atmosphere in the class or group, beliefs that every child can learn, high expectations from students from minority groups and continuous research into efficient methods of cooperation with parents (Macura-Milovanović, Gera & Kovačević, 2010). The questions regarding the factors that influence acquiring the competencies as well as the translation into teaching practice still remain unresolved.

According to the intercultural theory the way that people perceive cultural differences vary depending on the intercultural sensitivity of a person. Developmental model of intercultural sensitivity defines the qualitative change of the one's experience dealing with cultural differences along the continuum ethnocentrism – ethnorelativism (Bennett, 1986). Ethnocentricity refers to the phenomenon that those beliefs and behaviors that are adopted through primary socialization are not being questioned and are perceived as the reality rather than an interpretation of reality; it also refers to the different ways of avoiding cultural differences. In the case of ethnorelative worldview a person realizes that one's beliefs are only one of the possible ways to organize the reality (Bennett, 1986, 2004). The product of typical monocultural socialization is denial, which reflects the disinterest of a person towards cultural differences that are being overseen and avoided in the process of selective perception (Bennett, 1986, 2004). In the stage polarization people are capable of perceiving certain cultural differences, but the categories formed in that process are too general and lacking the essential understanding of the values and the influence of the context in which more obvious differences appeared. The stage of minimization in Bennett's model is characterized as the last stadium in ethnocentric view of reality, although in some of its manners it significantly overcomes the typical ethnocentric phases (Bennett, 1986). The main characteristics of minimization are reflected in the fact that a person perceives cultural differences on a more sophisticated manner in comparison to the previous stages, developing more specific cognitive categories and assigning humanity to all people. On the other side, in this stage a person perceive differences among people as minimal and even trivial, overstating the similarities and universal features of different phenomena (Bennett, 1986, 2004). Acceptance of cultural differences characterizes perceived as just one of the equally complex worldviews. One is capable of constructing generalized categories and contrasts among cultures which reflect deep cultural differences. Adaptation refers to the stage in which one's

worldview is expanded to include the relevant constructs from other cultures (Bennett, 2004).

### **Methodology and sample**

The methodology for the presented research is structured according to the concept of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), following mainly qualitative approaches. The main method of collecting data was the semi-structured in-depth interview. The main goals of the research were to determine: a) what kind of meaning that participants assign to the notion of cultural differences; b) how do they perceive their professional and personal experience with cultural differences; c) the manner in which they approach the teaching process in relation to perceived differences; and d) whether and in what way do they support their minority students. The interviews were transcribed and the content was analyzed according to Mayring (2014).

The sample in this small scope pilot research consists of eight teachers from two primary schools in Serbia. The schools have been chosen according to the criterion of the heterogeneity of the student population, among which the most numerous are students of Roma, Hungarian and Slovakian minority groups.

### **Findings**

We will expound two cases that, according to our understanding, reflect the differences in the manner in which the teachers can perceive cultural differences and relate to the differences that are present in the classrooms. The first case could be considered as representative for the most of the conducted interviews since the analysis has shown that the worldview of the most of the teachers participating in this research could be characterized as ethnocentric. In the second case the worldview of the teacher is more ethnorelative and it represents unique perspective upon a subject matter.

#### **Teacher 1**

When it comes to perceiving cultural differences this teacher understands that the term itself only refers to the most obvious differences, such as the physical appearance in the case of Roma cultural group.

The differences that are perceived within the school context are limited to observations that Roma students do not attend the lessons regularly. The reasons of this phenomenon are being assigned to the low socioeconomic status of their families, disinterest of their parents or inferior values.

*I wouldn't connect it with that, maybe when I compare the Roma families, there is the social status, and they have a lot of kids, so maybe the school is not that important in these families. It seems to me that it isn't... is it the parents' awareness; they think it's not all that necessary, or I really can't understand.*

Roma child is invisible in the school context, unlike the Hungarian or Slovakian children. The teacher comments the presence of the Roma child in her class only after being asked explicitly. In this case a particular child is perceived as an exception when it comes to stereotypical perception of the Roma cultural group.

*I don't. I mean, I do! I do have... he is so nice; I think he is a bit different from, from, from that group you call Roma. Somehow, he's so cute and lovable and he's not aggressive at all. And he is intelligent; I don't think they are not intelligent, far from that. But there is no nuisance with him. I don't separate him at all.*

Cultural differences in the case of the Roma cultural group are perceived only as an obstacle and a deficit of a particular child. For the teacher this represents a necessity for investing an additional effort in a process of making a lesson plan.

*You will definitely agree that working with Roma children is special. If nothing else, it's because they don't do their homework, or they do it very rarely. And then of course you have to separate them in some... You have a child that doesn't belong even in the first grade, because nowadays children come to the first grade half literate or literate. And then you have the lesson inside of a lesson.*

The mother tongue of the minority children that is different from the majority cultural group language is taken into account only in the case of Hungarian and Slovakian children. It is perceived as a challenge when it comes to maintaining good social relations in the class as well as the achieving educational outcomes, which results in lowering the expectations and the criterion.

*The first mistake they make when speaking Serbian is that they don't have different genders. He stood up, for example. And he said something and everybody started to laugh; I just said, well, how should he say it, help him so he wouldn't make that mistake the second time.*

*She made all the possible mistakes in her essay; there you couldn't find two grammatically appropriate sentences in total. I gave her another opportunity; it was much better but not nearly as some other essays of other excellent students but I gave her an excellent grade.*

## **Teacher 2**

There is a significant shift in frame of reference of the second teacher in comparison to the above presented world view. The way of perceiving cultural differences of the second teacher is more ethnorelative – resulted from the experience with the members of different cultural groups, personal as well as professional. Cultural differences are perceived on the level of customs and language, but also in terms of the cultural values. The differences are perceived as desirable and interesting as well as an opportunity and learning potential.

*First thing that comes to mind are the differences regarding the mother tongue. Most of the children around here come from the mixed marriages, and then one of the parents insisted that the child should learn Hungarian. It was interesting. I think that it is an advantage. Because you have, as I like to say, you have two open windows. You can always choose whether you will continue your schooling in this or that language.*

The differences that are reflected through the context of teaching process represent the ramified observations about the best approach in working with these children. Thus the differences in religious affiliation are perceived as something that needs to be respected. The teacher expresses a tendency to shift her perspective as a

majority group member and imagine the way that children as well as their parents could perceive dominant group cultural practice incorporated into the school practice.

*To celebrate Sveti Sava, every year we prepare the play for parents and I wonder. There are Catholic and Muslim children, how do they experience all of that... We always include some part of the programme in Hungarian, Slovakian and Roma... I find it important that they should feel special and, that the play belongs to them too.*

The teacher attempts to understand the position of the Roma parents and the feelings of the children that are absent from school, as well as the respect of the family values. At the same time this teacher is making an effort to support this particular child and improve the academic achievement.

*There was a boy, a Roma boy, who travelled somewhere abroad every once in a while with his parents so they could work there. I called them to have a talk with them, since I was told that the grandfather is the head of the family, I called him. We had a nice talk. I realized that it was hard for them to be apart, it was hard for him. It is very important to me to have the opportunity to work with him, even after the lessons, if necessary. We made the deal, and so it was.*

The cultural differences are perceived as learning and teaching opportunity rather than an obstacle when it comes to working with the heterogeneous population.

*And then one student told me that he celebrates slava as well. When I asked him which slava was his he said it was the Holy Hungarian... It was so important to him not to be different from the others; it was surely the pressure for him.*

*So I took them, we have Kirvaj that the local Hungarians celebrate, there by the church. I they should see what the riches that is, that they live so mixed up.*

The teacher is critically reflecting upon her attitudes and perception of the minority group (Roma). She expresses the tendency to reflect the factors that could have been influencing her beliefs regarding this minority group.

*I used to have very poor opinion of Roma people, I had my prejudice. Then I got to know them a bit better. When you approach them in the right way, when they feel that you respect them, that you want to understand them, then they relax.*

*Our parents told us not to sit with them, that they are dirty and that they would take something, steal. In reality this is just a fear of something that you are not aware, you do not know and then you have prejudices.*

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Most of the participants in this study expressed their understanding of the cultural difference in the way that could be characterized as an ethnocentric according to Bennett. The first presented interview illustrates the tendency of the teachers to perceive differences in a polarized way, and this worldview translates

through some specific concerns of the teacher in the school context. The teacher perceives only the superficial and obvious differences among the class members. The differences are connected to the obstacles and difficulties in teaching and learning process, which is the most obvious when there is language of the minority groups in question. The parents as the representatives of the minority cultural group are perceived as responsible for transferring appropriate values to their children and influencing school achievement. The perception of the teacher is different depending of her estimate of the potential commonality of values of minority groups with the values of the majority. The second interview illustrates the more ethnorelative worldview translation into context of schooling. The teacher perceives cultural differences in a more sophisticated and elaborated way, explaining the ways how these differences could be used as a learning opportunity for all the students. In a context of working with heterogeneous population she is demonstrating a tendency to take the perspective of minority students into account.

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Zakon o osnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja. *Službeni glasnik*, RC br. 12/72/2009.

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