



Focus on multicultural education in early childhood

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This article gives account of a research project concerning the implementation of multicultural education in two nurseries in Budapest. The research entailed focus group interviews with their teaching staff and collected qualitative data about their professional experience, views, the possible institutional approach to multicultural education, and how they evaluated its integration into their own programmes. Although the significance of multicultural education in early childhood is acknowledged, the field seems to be under-researched in Hungary. The experiences reported were overwhelmingly positive, but since the research context was limited, further investigation is necessary in the area.

Keywords: Early childhood education, multicultural education, inclusion, equity, nursery

Introduction

The recognition of the significance of early childhood pedagogy has recently increased in Hungary. Research has provided evidence that the experience gained at this age may significantly influence children's development. For this reason, we argue that multicultural education plays an important role in the programmes of early childhood education or social care institutions. The present article gives account of a research project conducted in the field of multicultural education in early childhood care in two nursery schools in Budapest. The study aims to explore early childhood care givers' knowledge and professional views on the topic.

The origin of multicultural education and international perspectives

Intercultural education in multicultural societies was initially interpreted as the educational perspective of minority groups. The dual meaning of the term can already be detected upon the formation of the idea of multicultural education in the 1960s: this approach and moral norm is called multicultural education in North America, whereas in Western Europe the same concept is labelled as intercultural education (Czachesz, 2007). Openness and acceptance between the various social groups is typical in an intercultural society (Göbölös & Endrődy, 2020).



Multicultural education is present in European education. Based upon her professional experience in Italy, Kollár (2000) gives account of two schools that managed to integrate intercultural education into their educational programmes. She provides evidence that the aim of multicultural education is the preservation of the cultures of ethnic minority groups. In Germany two important parallel trends can be observed in intercultural education. Similar to the anti-racist education common in England, the first trend is based on conflict management. The other trend focuses on tolerance and cultural learning. The use of intercultural pedagogy is increasing, gradually becoming the dominant form of education, and has extended its focus beyond minority groups (Czachesz, 2007). In agreement with Czachesz, it can be claimed that cultural learning and tolerance may be regarded as the main values of multicultural education. In Hungary, multicultural education appeared on the horizon of mainstream education after the social-economic transformations that took place during the 1989 political and economic transition period. It was during this era that the specific needs and demands of minorities were recognised and addressed (Torgyik, 2008). Multicultural education has been present in Hungary since this time and has gone through a number of developmental phases. This process of development is still in progress.

The concept of culture needs to be defined when discussing the concepts of multicultural education and intercultural pedagogy. The concept of culture is significant because culture affects human actions, ways of thinking, and behaviour, yet is also a phenomenon that keeps changing and cannot be regarded as a permanent or static concept (Torgyik, 2008). The differences between multicultural education and intercultural pedagogy need to be emphasized because these concepts are frequently used interchangeably by practitioners (Gordon Győri et al., 2014). The role of the teacher is of utmost importance: they continuously need to develop themselves professionally so that, in addition to their theoretical knowledge, they learn about the best practices in multicultural education. The professional attitude of the educational institution can also contribute to the development of children who come from different cultures and that of their caretakers. The educational institution can only be successful in multicultural education if it creates the appropriate supporting environment. This environment is mainly characterised by support and provision of professional help (Göbölös & Endrődy, 2020).

Theoretical underpinnings

Migration processes became intensive in the second half of the 20th century due to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the resulting conflicts in the Balkans, and the European integration processes. The situation further escalated due to the new war- and climatic change-related migration processes of the 21st century. These changes have repeatedly drawn attention to the significance of the multicultural society. Learning about local cultures and the colourful activities related to them can help preserve the multicultural heritage of the world; similarly, thematic activities in day care centres can also contribute to the preservation of this cultural heritage (Torgyik, 2008).

Although several possible definitions of multicultural education exist, theoreticians have not yet agreed on any. According to Banks and Banks' definition, multicultural education is a reform movement whose goal is to provide equity and equal educational means for students of any gender, ethnic background or socioeconomic classes (Banks, 2001). Multicultural education is interpreted slightly differently in the journal *Hungarian Pedagogy* (*Magyar Pedagógia*). Bruch (1995) describes it as a problem, or rather as a concern that members of the majority of society feel toward members of minority groups that have historically been discriminated. Today the term is used in a wider sense: it is a term to express the differences between social, gender, economic, and racial opportunities in society (Bruch, 1995). According to Gorski (2006), most researchers have agreed upon several principles:

1. Multicultural education is a political movement that is committed to guarantee underrepresented students' secured environments where they can feel safe and protected.
2. We need school reform in order to reach the goal of multicultural education.
3. We constantly need critical analysis of our own practices and philosophies.
4. We should focus on abolishing educational inequities.
5. Multicultural education is relevant and important for all students and participants in the educational process. (Gorski, 2006)

It is also necessary to discuss the concept of the inclusion index. Although for many, inclusion is traditionally connected to the education of disabled or special needs children, the wider goal of this index is to create a system of education that reaches out to all children. Using this index can aid the definition and formation of schools or kindergartens where everyone is able to find their place according to their own needs. The content of the concept can be broken down into four parts: basic terminology, which catalyses the acquisition of an inclusive attitude, the system, the support materials, and the inclusive process, which supports the practical application of inclusive education (Booth & Ainscow, 2009).

One of the participating nurseries in the research, "Józsefvárosi Egyesített Bölcsődék" (Association of Nurseries in Józsefváros), duly recognised that developing the institution based upon a multicultural approach is prerequisite for the staff's professional development. As part of the developmental process, they searched to answer the question of what multiculturalism means in early childhood education. In order to create a multicultural context and openness towards globalisation, theoretical and practical problems need to be addressed. Such practical problems may include communication with non-Hungarian speaking parents. Last but not least, the issue of sustaining an open-minded attitude among the staff requires further exploration (Bajzáth & Bereczkiné, 2017).

Previous research

A study by Csapó and Czachesz (1995) examined teenagers' attitudes towards other nations. Data collection was carried out by the EURONET group in 12 countries, a total of 14 samples. The first topic dealt with the most popular

countries among young people. The data revealed that wealthy Western countries are regarded as 'universally popular' but there are also individual preferences that have 'local value.' The results proved that the attraction to Western countries is fairly significant and the young people in Eastern countries are eager to establish contact with Western ones. It can also be seen from the data that the United States leads the list in popularity among the Western countries. In contrast, Germany seems to be regarded as the least popular Western country and this fact may be attributed to its role in history (Csapó & Czachesz, 1995). In order to understand the variables that influence attitudes toward other countries, the level of education, social, and economic status of the individuals need to be considered. At the time of the research project multicultural education only had a very brief history in Western countries and was practically unknown in Central and Eastern Europe (Csapó & Czachesz, 1995).

The goal of the eTwinning (European School Twinning Platform) programme is the establishment of international partnerships between teaching staffs and students at schools in the European Union member states. Part of the Erasmus+ project and supported by the EU, the programme provides an online platform for collaboration. Hungary became part of the programme in 2005. While the students and teachers share their learning materials, they get acquainted with each other's cultures and develop their intercultural competence. The role of the teacher is that of an intercultural mediator responsible for establishing contact between their own students and those of a partner country. An additional benefit to these cooperative projects is that they have the potential to enrich the teachers' methodology 'toolbox' (Lakatosné, 2010). Lakatosné's research confirmed that teachers and students' knowledge about each other's cultures and their intercultural competences significantly developed as a result of e-Twinning projects.

The study in the field of multicultural education by Gordon Győri, Németh and Czachesz (2014) concerns a focus group discussion among 50 teachers from 18 primary schools in Budapest. The study found that 'empathy' was the most frequently used word during the focus group discussion about intercultural teacher competence. The participants emphasised the important role of continuous parental contact in order to promote cooperation in the field of education. The results and conclusion of the study were the following: the teachers felt neglected and left to work on their own. Another topic that emerged during the discussions was why parents had changed schools for their children. The participants seemed to agree that the most frequent reason for this is that if the parent is dissatisfied with the service provided by the school and faces a lack in communication, they take their children to another school. Schools try to employ various strategies in order to face this challenge. (Gordon Győri et al., 2014). The study pointed out that during the focus group discussion about intercultural teacher competence, empathy was the most frequently mentioned topic.

Some studies explore the case of disadvantaged children. One specific research examined the case of a Budapest kindergarten, where 20% of children come from

disadvantaged/underprivileged backgrounds (Herczeg, 2007). This study was mentioned in one of the focus group interviews. As the participants explained, the differences between the level of children's socialisation can be perceived as soon as the child starts preschool/nursery or kindergarten. The reason behind these differences is mainly that they come from families with different lifestyles or cultures. As the family is the primary scene of socialisation, this factor has a deep effect on children's behaviour, communication, and physical appearance. It is manifested noticeably in those Budapest nurseries mentioned in the study by Herczeg (2007). The local child protection agency may take action in the following areas: socio-cultural disadvantages, emotional unstableness, and neglectful parental care. These disadvantages are closely interrelated because those parents who feel frustrated by their own social and financial standards of life tend to ease their tension through aggression or addiction. Parents struggling with the afore-mentioned problems are unable to provide the safe and loving environment much needed for their children's development. A child coming to kindergarten from a disadvantaged background is typically unfamiliar with basic nutritional and hygienic routines. It is often in the kindergarten that they use paper napkins or toothpaste for the first time. In such cases it is the kindergarten that should ensure that the children regularly attend preschool or kindergarten. The role of the caretaker or kindergarten teacher, who accepts and loves the child unconditionally, is critical because this is the only path that can lead to the child's self-acceptance. Inclusive pedagogy and skills development in the kindergarten examined in the study are the only ways to enable children from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve the developmental level required to enrol into primary school.

The focus group interview

The main data collection tool applied in the current research was focus group interviews. The moderator of the interviews is the researcher, who facilitates the conversation, which is guided by pre-planned questions. Nádasi (2011) classifies the focus group interview as a type of interview which can also be referred to as a group interview. This method is well suited for gathering information about collective knowledge. Through such interviews it is possible to get to know the opinion of both a single individual and the different individuals in a group. During these discussions it is sometimes what is left unsaid that matters (Nádasi, 2011).

The goal of these interviews is not to gain numerical data, but rather to establish qualitative categories and find the relationships between them. Through qualitative research, the researcher will also become more involved in and part of the observation procedure. This arrangement was meant to supply an extra level of support in exploring the researched topic.

Research context and procedure

The research consisted of two focus group interviews with participants who work as early childhood caregivers. They work in two different institutions

of the Association of Nurseries in Józsefváros in the 8th district of Budapest. These nurseries were chosen because they are both in partnership with the nursery at which one member of the research team had spent her teaching practice in Florence, Italy. The first focus group interview was carried out in one of the nurseries/preschools of the Association of Nurseries in Józsefváros in October 2019. Altogether four early childhood caregivers participated in the interview, which was held in the staffroom. The second focus group interview was held one year later, in November 2020 in the Mini-Manó Nursery of the Association of Nurseries in Józsefváros. Here there were two participants. Four questions were asked of the participants in both of the interviews. These questions were the following:

1. Please describe your experience in the field of multicultural education.
2. Why do you regard multicultural education as important in early childhood care?
3. Please describe the process of how the nursery embraced its current approach to multicultural education and what values this approach represents.
4. Which of the features of multicultural education would you highlight and recommend to all nurseries to integrate into their programmes?

Focus group interview with caregivers in nurseries

The next section of the article gives an account of the results gained from the focus group interviews. The participants are referred to by initials, which are based on their physical appearance. The director of Mini Manó Nursery agreed to the use of her real name and will be referred to as Heni.

The results of focus group interview 1

Introduction

Before the conversation, the four participants and the interviewer introduced themselves and briefly described their professional background. V. had completed a vocational training in pedagogy and been working as an early childhood teacher for five years. F. graduated with a BA in Early Childhood Education at Eötvös Loránd University, had been working as a caregiver for two years and joined Játékvár Nursery in September 2019. Sz., who had been at her job for three-and-a-half years had also completed a vocational training course. She had not received her BA degree due to lacking the required B2 language examination. G. had been working in the 8th district as a qualified infant caregiver. The interviewer had already received her BA in Early Childhood Education and was a BA student in Kindergarten Education.

1. Please describe your experience in the field of multicultural education.

There seemed to be agreement among the participants that a child from a foreign country can easily fit into the community of the group in the nursery,

learn the majority language, and adapt to the customs in the country. Each child is entitled to equal treatment at the nursery. In some cases, however, a non-Hungarian infant may need more attention and help than the rest of the group. This special attention is always provided to them. In many cases, the presence of an interpreter or cultural mediator is necessary since the early childhood teacher is not always able to communicate in foreign languages. To illustrate this, they quoted some examples from their own professional experience, when Italian or Chinese parents were accompanied by a translator on their visit. All in all, effective communication is an unavoidable part of a good relationship between the institution and the parents. However, this arrangement is not typical and some early childhood teachers may sense multicultural groups as challenging since they are unable to communicate with the parents in that group as effectively as with Hungarian-speaking parents. In contrast, infants are able fit into any social environment, even without speaking the same language as the rest of the children and teachers.

2. Why do you regard multicultural education as important in early childhood care?

Early childhood teachers or early childhood teachers practicing multicultural education need to acquire a number of competences that are essential when working with Hungarian children, as well. Such competences include empathy, the ability for self-reflection, and good interpersonal skills. These skills are necessary for interacting both with Hungarian and non-Hungarian families: we live in a multicultural society and the nursery is the space for socialisation. Whatever the children experience outside the nursery appears in the children's behaviour in the groups.

Among others, the aim is to model how to be open to other people and make friends. The participants emphasised that early childhood teachers need to realise that multicultural education is present in many aspects of our life and it is not a question of choice. For example, when a child from a different culture joins the group, the teacher will tell the rest of the children about the customs in the new child's culture. They explain why the child does not eat beef or why the mother wears a veil.

3. Please describe the process of how the nursery embraced its current approach to multicultural education and what values it represents.

The significance of early childhood education and its influence on how a child will manage to progress in their schooling or when they drop out of the education system has been recognised by the European Union. The lack of quality education in early childhood may have a negative impact on the child's school career. Therefore, instead of simple childcare, quality early childhood education has gained priority in nurseries. Nowadays, early childhood education not only involves projects, but literary education and nutrition training have been reformed as well. Children's meals are prepared by using a wide variety of techniques. At the moment, the educational programme of the

nursery does not contain an intercultural component, but its implementation is in progress. By the time of the interview, a needs analysis had been conducted among early childhood teachers concerning a training programme aimed at intercultural skills. They intended to map out the teachers' training needs and how they would be able to acquire those skills. The needs analysis was carried out through a questionnaire circulated among the staff. The questionnaire is the continuation of the IECEC (Intercultural Early Childhood Education and Care) Curriculum Design for Professionals project. The needs analysis had already been completed with the ultimate goal of introducing a training course for the teachers. The procedure had been carried out in cooperation with the Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education, Eötvös Loránd University. A project team in the nursery was involved in completing case studies and designing protocols. The efficiency of each method was tested through observations.

4. Which of the features of multicultural education would you highlight and recommend to all nurseries to integrate into their programmes?

The composition of children's groups is unique in each nursery and therefore it would be difficult to emphasise one decisive feature. Few studies have been carried out in terms of needs analyses in multicultural education in various nursery institutions. The employment of an intercultural cultural moderator would be beneficial in every nursery. However, in some of our nurseries, which are attended by special needs children only, employing an occupational therapist would be necessary. Multicultural education should be formed according to the specific needs of each nursery.

Second focus group interview

Mini-Manó Nursery was mentioned and recommended during the first focus group interview. Based on this recommendation, it was decided to make contact and involve their staff in the research. A year had passed since the first focus group interview and several changes had occurred meanwhile; the Covid pandemic had become a part of our lives. Education has gone through dramatic changes moving into the digital world, masks need to be worn in the streets, shops, restaurants, and cafés. Temperature is taken upon entering nurseries, the number of people in closed spaces is regulated and limited, and trainees are frequently not allowed to enter and take part in their teaching practice. Because of these circumstances the group interview was organised and held on an online platform. The director of the nursery, Heni (Vajda Krisztiánné) was flexible; she agreed to support this arrangement fully, which seemed to be the safest for each participant.

Introduction

Working as an early childhood teacher for 35 five years, A. had participated in a five-week training project in Florence. Heni, my contact, is the director of the nursery. She holds several degrees and has been working as an early childhood teacher for a long time as well.

1. Please describe your experience in the field of multicultural education.

Immediately at the beginning of the interview an unexpected piece of information surfaced. Heni explained that her husband is Roma and she has two children who are thus half-Roma and so she has first-hand experience in the topic in her own family. The conversation continued in the direction of inclusion instead of multiculturalism. The two participants explained that, based on their previous experience, they had come to the conclusion that contrasting and emphasising differences is not a good approach. Heni explained that this nursery employs the highest percentage of Roma staff (93%). Inclusive education has an outstanding role to play in the nursery, because several children are of Asian, African American, and Indian descent. In the teachers' experience if they accept the families, understand their cultures, and do not ask too many questions, it is possible to establish a working relationship between the early childhood teacher and the children, as well as the early childhood teacher and the parents. Their motto is "acceptance instead of conflict".

2. Why do you regard multicultural education as important in early childhood care?

The second interview question had to be modified, since while answering the first question, it became clear that the discussion was going to divert from its original plans. Inclusive approach replaced multicultural education and the rest of the questions were modified in order to follow this shift in focus.

The policy of the nursery is to help children not to feel different from the others. The guiding principle is that everyone should be sensitive towards the other and be accepted as they are. Every child and parent needs to follow the rules of the nursery, notwithstanding their cultural background. It is important to emphasise that these rules are acceptable for every parent coming from any cultural background. At this point the interviewer asked if there were any problems in communication due to linguistic differences. Heni pointed out that in the nursery all teachers hold a university degree, which by law is only issued to students who have passed a B2 language examination. Therefore, every teacher is capable of communicating with the parents in English. In the rare case when there is a language problem, the teachers encourage the parents to talk to the child in their mother tongue, read stories, sing a song or chant some nursery rhymes with them in this language. This strengthens the mother tongue, which usually helps to ease the child's anxiety.

The interviewer wanted to find out how children from different cultures are socialised in the group. The teachers explained that they do not talk about this to the others, they let the rest of the children in the group experience and explore what the new child is like. In their opinion the different behaviour of the newly arrived child is not the result of coming from a different culture, but rather stems from the difference in their personality. In the teachers' professional experience at such a young age there are no significant differences between cultures, such as in the practice of feeding or using nappies. Heni brought up the example of a young girl from India whom they let eat using her

hands. They did not ask her to change or “correct” her table manners and use cutlery because she would not feel at ease in such a situation. The interviewer wanted to find out if they use songs in foreign languages for the sake of children who come from a different cultural background. In their answer the teachers expressed their views that the nursery does not want to make the transitional phase into the institution even harder and thereby increase the traumatic experience of having to leave their home country. This is a task for the parent of the child to cope with: they need to process the experience together, in a more intimate environment. The goal of the institution is to create an honest, open, and accepting educational environment.

3. Please describe the process of how the nursery embraced its current approach to multicultural education and what values it represents.

For the formation of this approach, it is necessary to possess relevant professional knowledge and personal experience (i.e., the participant meant that she had married into a Roma family). The director managed to share these experiences with her colleagues. They had previously frequently held cultural events whereby the parents learnt about each other’s customs and food. However, these events were not always successful. She emphasised that because of her children’s experiences she can better sympathise when someone is negatively discriminated or treated due to their Roma origin. In her opinion, emphasising otherness, or a different background may have the opposite effect of what was originally intended. In their nursery the inclusive system has proved to be successful based on years of experience. They support children to be themselves, have stronger confidence, and this approach effectively prepares them for kindergarten and school. At this point the conversation took a more personal turn and Heni pointed out the following: “People do not act or respond in a way because they are of Roma, Indian or Asian origin, but because this is what they are like as persons.” In order to integrate somebody, a person needs to be accepted. Focusing on otherness may easily take the wrong direction.

4. Which of the features of multicultural education would you highlight and recommend to all nurseries to integrate into their programmes?

Once again, the interview question needed some modification. The participants were asked to highlight one element of not multicultural, but rather inclusive education that they would like to see applied in every nursery. They think that the inclusive approach should be applied everywhere. Heni expressed that she does not regard the Roma as multicultural. She did not elaborate on this idea, but instead explained that she regarded the inclusive approach to be the primary goal in every nursery because this approach can strengthen children’s self-confidence. They viewed sensitivity as the most important element in inclusive education.

Summary

The goal of this research project was to explore the practitioners' knowledge and views concerning multicultural education. This was realised through two focus group interviews. The first area of exploration concerned the professional experience of early childhood teachers. Although some negative perceptions had been expected to surface, all six research participants mentioned positive experiences and examples. They elaborated on the topic of innovation in the field of early childhood education and explained that in order to introduce these innovations, a series of needs analyses ought to be carried out. The reason for this is that in each nursery children come from a unique set of backgrounds, and they each require a tailor-made approach. These needs analyses are instrumental in gaining a clear picture of the situation in the nurseries and planning their multicultural approaches in an appropriate way. Unfortunately, few studies have been published in the field so far.

The participants of the first focus group were all familiar with the concept of multicultural education and they considered it important in early childhood education. The nursery examined through this interview had already recognised the significance of multicultural education. They had already carried out needs analysis among the teachers with the help of a questionnaire and based on its results, they are planning to devise an in-service course. The research project further aimed to involve competent early childhood teachers who would supply relevant answers concerning multicultural education. This expectation proved to be successful since the respondents mentioned several examples from their practice and concepts that support the practice of multicultural education.

The second focus group interview was successful in formulating a number of new goals and questions. The interview focused on inclusive education and emphasised its importance in early childhood education. When reviewing the theoretical background, elements of the inclusion index were often mentioned in the conversation. However, the practical application of this index is not required of the nurseries by law. Every stakeholder, that is, teachers, parents and children, may be included and contribute to inclusive education in their own way. The goals and problem areas in the field of inclusive education outlined in the interview could be the target of a new research project that would focus on the effective application of inclusive education in nurseries, its advantages and disadvantages, and how teachers view the application of this approach. The results of the two focus group interviews have proved that success only occurs when the two approaches, that is, multiculturalism and inclusion, are integrated. The two approaches combined may lead to complete acceptance. However, sensitivity is probably the most important underlying value that can be found in both approaches and is part of complete acceptance. If we are open and receptive towards others, inclusion can be achieved more easily. This is extremely important for the child, who will become able to accept him- or herself more easily. Sensitivity affects communication and cooperation with the children's families. Complete acceptance may be realised not through emphasising differences, but rather by letting these differences flourish.

This research has shed light on the lack of professional literature and research at the examined institutions in the topic of multicultural approach in early childhood education. This gap may be related to the fact that this type of need for early childhood education institutions and teachers has not yet been sufficiently addressed. Although the scope of the research described in this article is limited to a small number of participating early childhood teachers and their institutions, a number of observations can be made. Most of the participating teachers realise the important role the multicultural approach plays in early childhood education. They seem to have internalised the values of multicultural and inclusive education and aim to do their educational work accordingly. They gave account of positive experiences in their reflections. However, significant institutional changes can only be realised if the circumstances, needs, and expectations of a larger number of early childhood educational institutions have been surveyed and processed. The repetition of the present research on a wider scale would contribute to achieving this goal. The results would be more reliable and valid if the research covered a more representative sample that includes different districts in Budapest and other parts of the country.

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