

Tolerance of Diversity in Polish Schools: Education of Roma and Ethics Classes

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There is a gap between theory and practice in Polish schools as regards the accommodation of diversity: while both the curriculum and relevant guidelines to teachers strongly emphasise the need for promoting the ideas of intercultural education and acceptance of diversity, **little is done in practice** to implement these principles in Polish school life.

Actually, accommodating cultural diversity is not a priority in Polish education. **Schools are ranked according to their teaching efficiency.** Teachers are aware of this discrepancy and acknowledge that the students' behaviour, including tolerance towards 'otherness', should be given more value in the educational process and in school performance evaluation. **Tolerance towards intolerant behaviour and language in a school depends to a large extent on the school principal's attitude and sensitivity.** The headmaster's personal perception of the issue can shape the everyday practices in a given school.

Our research shows that even though the Polish educational system has constantly been reformed and adjusted to the changing social and political situation (the collapse of communism, EU integration, global educational challenges), **little attention is paid to adjusting curricula to ethno-cultural diversity, or implementing an alternative to training in religion, i.e. classes in ethics.**

Accommodating diversity is not a priority in Polish schools. In addition each school practices on the issue are mainly shaped by the personal views of the school principal rather than by the official curriculum.

The Ethnic composition of the Polish school population

With regard to ethnic and religious diversity Polish society is homogenous. By the current European standards, **a very low rate of students come from minorities and immigrant communities.** For instance, according to Central Statistical Office, the total number of immigrant students currently oscillates around **4000**, which barely comprise 0.06% of the total student population in primary and secondary education. **This miniscule proportion in relation to the Polish majority makes the practical dimension of tolerance for diversity in Polish schools virtually absent.**

Meanwhile, to determine the number of foreign students in schools is not an easy task (see Table 1). It is also virtually impossible to verify the number of students who are members of national, ethnic and religious minorities including Roma people, who hold Polish citizenship, simply because schools do not keep records on nationality/ethnicity and the religious affiliation of students.

Type of school	2001/2002	2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006
Primary school	2,6	2,1	3	2,8	2,6
Gymnasium	0,5	0,7	0,8	0,7	0,6
Secondary school	0,6	0,7	0,8	1,1	0,8

Education for diversity: paying lip service

After Polish accession to the European Union (2004), closer attention has been paid to developing specific guidelines for teachers at all levels of schooling on how to accommodate diversity and adopt intercultural principles in the classroom.

However, these guidelines were not accompanied by a reform of the teaching methods nor by appropriate teacher training, which would assist them in implementing an intercultural education approach. Thus, state educational policy is mostly geared towards the local authorities' actions and responsibility, i.e. in fact no general policy is applied. Despite the adoption of all EU legal recommendations in the field of education and protection of minority rights, a discrepancy between European provisions and their actual application is a salient characteristic of the educational system in Poland. Teachers simply neglect the issue.

Repeated reforms of the Polish education system contribute to a sense of confusion among teachers and create a chaotic and constantly transforming policy area. This problem affects obviously also the ways in which Polish schools deal with ethnic or religious diversity challenges when these arise.

Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

CASE 1: THE UPS AND DOWNS OF EDUCATION FOR THE ROMA

At the state level, the education of the Roma is covered by the 'Program for the Roma community in Poland'. The Program aims to improve the level of education among Roma children through increasing graduation rates, improving attendance and the learning outcomes of Roma children and youth, and facilitating the Roma youth to continue their education in secondary schools and institutions of higher education. Our first case study deals with the **local response of Poznań activists, education officers and teachers to the failure of the implementation of the Program**, caused in this particular situation by the Roma families' dispersion in the area. It also exposes the attitudes towards members of the Roma minority in the schooling system. The study also investigated the functioning of evening schools founded by a Roma NGO ('Bahtale Roma') in cooperation with local administration and public school teachers. The findings show that:

- The authorities believe that **it is the minorities' duty – in this case of the Roma – to adapt to the majority culture.**
- **The universal state education requirements apply to everyone** - this is the main message that education and local authorities send to the representatives of the Roma community. The officials interviewed noted that they see no other possibility of cooperation than the enforcement of universally applicable rules to all children, regardless of their origin or nationality. These strategies of coping with 'the Roma problem' are accompanied by vigorous declarations of tolerance as a 'natural' feature of every Pole, especially of teachers. Officials believe that it is not their duty to pay respect to Roma's culture and practices, but the Roma should accept the reality of the education system in Poland and **respect the majority's assumptions.**
- For the interviewed officials and most of the teachers, the ideal is cultural assimilation of the minority to the mainstream Polish culture rather than mutual respect for difference.
- The Bahtale initiative to create a school co-managed by the Roma while laudable creates the risk of **segregation**. When a Roma only special school is available (as recommended by the Roma elders interviewed), Roma pupils and students will not be interested in the inclusion into mainstream education.

'I think that the situation in schools would be improved if the stereotype of Roma in the common consciousness was changed for the better. It might not be so visible with children, but.. when Gypsies come to the store, everyone holds their wallets and bags close to their body, me too.'

Interviewee, headmaster of a local school with experience with Roma children

Mandatory education should be imposed. This should not be tolerated, why? [not complying to this duty should be punished]. If I do nothing, I give silent acquiescence.'

Interviewee, employee of a local Department of Education

CASE 2: CROSSES AND RELIGION – THE POLISH SCHOOL IN NEED OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE?

The second case study addresses the place of religion in school life looking at two issues: the removal of crosses from classrooms – they were commonly present there since the fall of communism – and the teaching of religion or ethics. Indeed, there have been rare attempts at removing some of the crosses followed the European Court of Human Rights sentence passed in 2009 (Lautsi vs. Italy case – the court stated that the order of hanging crosses in Italian public schools is illegal). As a result, similar discussions arouse on teaching classes on ethics for students who do not attend religion classes. An intense debate was engendered by a family that sued their son’s school (in principle, the Polish state) to the Court of Human Rights for not fulfilling the obligation to organise classes on ethics (Grzelak vs. Poland case).

MAIN FINDINGS

- For the majority of Polish people, cultural or religious diversity in Polish schools is not an issue either because **‘the problem does not exist’**, or because they see the dominance of the majority traditions and beliefs over those of the minority as a **‘natural’ part of life**.
- The above mentioned court cases (and in particular the decision over the Grzelak vs. Poland case) has raised the awareness of school teachers that they should be more tolerant attitude towards parents who oppose religious education.
- Measures for accommodating the parents’ claims against religious education include securing classes on ethics as an alternative course. However, in schools where parents’ meetings were organized to discuss the issue, these ended up in verbal attacks on the initiators of these discussions rather than on deciding on a commonly acceptable solution.
- Similarly there is intolerance towards those demanding that crucifixes are removed from classrooms. Opponents of the status quo define their appeals as a fight for the neutrality of public space and the secular character of the state. Supporters of the current situation argue that this is in line with Polish history and national identity.
- Nobody really asks students about their actual needs and what they want. Even the parents that are critical of the existing status quo, for the sake of peace and tranquility, do not contest it and do not strive for the implementation of more liberal principles. In result, this kind of deadlock persists and it is only occasionally interrupted by some events that attract media attention and stir some debate on the place of religion in European countries.

Key Messages for Policy Makers

EDUCATION OF ROMA

There is improvement in the education of Roma children, but Romani activists and community elders as well as city officials and ordinary teachers should improve their good will to cooperate with each other.

National level

- School teachers and headmasters must develop **local strategies for reducing high school absenteeism and/or school abandonment by Roma children**. Relevant strategies include:
 - **new teaching methods (more participatory methods),**
 - **new curricula (geared towards the traditional crafts and professions of the Roma community), and**
 - **teacher training for implementing these new methods and curricula.**
 - **These changes should be agreed upon and implemented through cooperation** between municipal authorities, the Ministry of Education, NGO activists (especially from Roma NGOs) and schools so as to achieve an integrated approach to Roma children integration in schools
- Curricula in mainstream schools should prioritise civic citizenship courses for all students teaching tolerance and respect towards minority groups.

Regional level (Poznań)

- Further efforts should be made in order to **transform the curriculum** in the schools of the 'Bahtale Roma' Foundation to make it more relevant to the educational needs of Roma children in the region.
- Evaluation of the 'Bahtale Roma' Foundation's programme.
- Introduction of a **pilot program** supporting the creation of schools based on cooperation between Roma NGOs and local schools in other towns in Wielkopolska is highly recommended.

ETHICS CLASSES

To fight the current impasse regarding the presence of religious symbols in school spaces, a **negotiation process should start** with a debate between the Educational Boards and other officials, priests, teachers, parents and students. Such a debate, held in a mutually tolerant and respectful atmosphere would be the first and necessary step towards the acceptance of pluralism in schools in Poland.

National level

- A **common core curriculum** for the teaching of ethics (and religion) should be introduced in order to harmonise the standards of teaching and forms of employment for teachers of this subject, manuals adapted to modern educational standards should be introduced nationwide.
- **Provide better information on ethics classes organization**, clear procedures and available space (particularly in the Internet) enabling action in case of infringement of educational law.

Regional level

- Headmasters should take steps to ensure that secondary school **students may express their opinions** on the lessons of religion and ethics, as well as their expectations with regard to forms of education in these areas.
- Parents should receive **standardized, comprehensive information** about the feasibility of teaching ethics in schools attended by their children, and should also be informed about the scope of the material and forms of implementation of ethics (and religion) classes in schools.

Methodology

The research was based on the analysis of the scholarly literature, policy documents circulated by the Ministry of National Education (MEN) and the Ministry of Interior and Administration, reports and expert documents on minority education in Poland, articles in newspapers, and qualitative interviews conducted for the purposes of this study.

The **interviews** were conducted between February and May 2011 with employees of educational institutions, teachers, headmasters and NGO activists engaged in the efforts aimed at improving the education and integration of the Roma minority in Poznań and Swarzędz (case study 1), as well as with people involved in the disputes about the presence of religious symbols in school buildings and in public education (case study 2).

Interviews were semi-structured: the guidelines were treated merely as a helpful tool for keeping the basic scheme of the interview. Spontaneous comments of the respondents were particularly desired as the views on the topics addressed during interviews are often rooted in stereotypes. Simultaneously, questions about the situation of national minorities and the attitude toward religion proved to be quite embarrassing for many informants. In total, **16 interviews** were conducted with employees of the Educational Board, the Department of Education of the Municipality of Poznań, teachers, principals, the head of a Romani NGO, a lawyer working in the field of human rights and one high school student.

Project Identity

Acronym:	ACCEPT PLURALISM
Title:	Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
Short Description:	<p>ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.</p> <p>Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.</p> <p>In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.</p> <p>The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.</p>
Website:	www.accept-pluralism.eu
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