

OLIVERA KNEZEVIC FLORIC & STEFAN NINKOVIC**MULTICULTURALISM: CHALLENGE OR REALITY****Abstract**

The paper analyses situations, conditions of social discourse and necessary actions for the implementation of multicultural education in the education system of the countries in transition (Republic of Serbia), from the perspective of interpretative paradigms. In the first part of the paper, the authors explain a theoretical understanding of the term multiculturalism as a public asset, and as the term which does not go in line of the traditional ethical principles. The second part of the paper focuses on the importance of creation of different conditions for the social discourse of the countries in transition in order to make the multiculturalism order not only the ethical option, but also the ethical need. In that sense, the basic thesis of this paper is that education, as a reference point, and the interactive relationship of individuals is the only possible way to understand the world in the continuous change.

Introduction

How to determine *other* and different? A perpetual and unresolved issue of human civilization has been imposed before our ancestors for centuries, and today, it has been posed to us, with the same power. Perhaps it should be recalled that a man has always had three possible reactions in relation to *other*: he could choose a war, isolate himself, or establish a dialogue. Throughout history, the man speculated among these three possibilities, and depending on the culture and era in which he lived, he could choose one of the three listed options. When a meeting with *other* would start with a conflict, it has usually led to a tragedy and a war, which produces only losers. Inability to agree with *others*, to be in their shoes, indicates imperfection of human beings and focuses on the question of human rationality. A desire of some people to build walls in order to get isolated from *others* has been called, in our time, the apartheid. With a lot of simplification, it is a doctrine, which proclaims that everybody can live as he/she wants, with a condition that he/she must be far from me if he/she is not my race, religion and culture. Similarly, the myths and legends of many nations present a belief that only "we who are our group", the members of our clan, and our society, are human beings - all the others are less than humans.

However, an image of *other* was completely different at the time of anthropomorphic beliefs, at the time when the gods had a human figure and when they were able to behave like persons. At that time, it was never known whether the traveler who was approaching you was a God or a man. That uncertainty or an interesting ambiguity was, in fact, one of the sources of the cultural hospitality, which ordered that a traveler or a visitor must be heartily welcome. The traveler's background was unknown and often inconceivable. The 'Greek culture' sheds a new light on the meaning and understanding of *other*, gates and doors do not only serve to remove *the other*, but also to open before him, and invite him to step over the threshold. A road is not necessarily the way which brings the enemy army; it may be the path that will bring some of our gods, dressed in the vestments of the pilgrims.

Emmanuel Levinas said that 'the event' is a 'meeting with the other' (Levinas, 1994), more precisely it is the 'basic event', because it is the most important experience that opens up the widest horizons. Levinas belongs to the "family" of dialogists, like the philosophers Martin Buber, Ferdinand Ebner, and Gabriel Marcel who have developed the idea of *other*, as a single and unique entity, starting from the positions which are the opposite to the phenomena characteristic for the twentieth century: a society of masses which cancels a diversity of individuals and ideologies which are totalitarian and destructive. These philosophers tried to preserve everything they considered to be of the top value: an individual. They wanted to save it from mass and totalitarian regime which destroyed every special identity: me, you, another, others. In this respect, their thinking was focused on the notion of *other* with a "big O", in order to underline the difference among individuals, as well as the difference among their individual characteristics, which were so different and so unique. This school of thinking had major implications on the former conception of a human being. It raised a human being and *other* as well, and as Levinas said: "... I have a duty not only to treat *others* equally and to keep a dialogue, but I must be responsible for them." (Levinas, 1994). Because of that, this school of thought criticizes the indifference and attempts of hiding behind walls, emphasizing the necessity of open positions, convergence and a good will as an ethical duty of every person.

The same stream of thoughts have developed the work and attitudes of the great anthropologist B. Malinovsky; a deciding point of his life and work was searching for the answers to the question: how to approach to the *other* if it is not a hypothetical and theoretical being, but the real one, and which, as such, belongs to another ethnic group, speaks another language, has different religion, different system of values, and which has one's own customs and traditions. In other words, it has one's own culture? (Malinovsky, 1989). Malinovsky went to the Pacific Islands in order to meet *other* and explore his/her way of life, his/her customs and language. Malinovsky wanted to see *other* with his own eyes and to be in his/her shoes. He wanted an authentic experience, not only in the contact with *other*, but as an authentic experience as *other*. After the research, he explained his not so pleasant experiences in *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1989). Among other things, the author evoked memories on difficulties, despair, common languor and depression which he faced in a position of *other*. Following his authentic experience, Malinovsky has pointed out that all the other inhabitants of our planet are *others* against *others*, and that every person who is separated from his culture, willingly or not, pays a high price (Malinovsky, 1989). Therefore, according to him, it is very important to have cleared one's own identity, and a strong belief in the power and the value of personal identity. Only in that way a person can calmly face another culture. Otherwise, he will tend to hide, isolate himself, and be afraid of the reality that surrounds him. Malinovsky also pointed out another argument, which was very brave at the time: "There are no higher and lower cultures, there are only different cultures, which meet the needs and expectations of those who share, each one in its own way." (Malinovsky, 1989).

It has been said that the contemporary world is multiethnic and multicultural, not because the number of societies and cultures has increased, but because they speak louder, independently and decisively, demanding recognition of their true

values. All of this opens the way to the world which is so new, that the experiences acquired throughout history may not be sufficient to understand the world and find landmarks in it. However, it is certain that the world can be called a "planet of great opportunities" (Rorty, 1991). In both current and future world, we will always meet a new *other*; we will always have to try to understand and establish a dialogue with him/her. The *other* will always emerge from two mutually opposed courses of our reality which we have to be aware of and understand; from the course of liberal globalization, which uniforms our reality, as well as from the course which keeps our diversities, our originality and our uniqueness.

Multiculturalism in the countries in transition: a challenge or reality

In the world which is more and more multicultural, challenges of education also become bigger and more complex. As globalization process becomes more immediate reality for the inhabitants of the planet, a need to understand changes in the traditional vision of the community, nation and the state also becomes a growing necessity. One of the most important roles of formal education in many countries in transition is "modeling" of good, obedient citizens who share a common identity and who are loyal to the nation – the state (Toleubekova, 2010; Knezevic-Floric, 2009). And though it undoubtedly serves for an honorable purpose, and although it has been necessary in the certain social circumstances, in the most cases exactly that role has led to marginalization of many ethnic groups whose cultures, religions, languages and the way of life, which do not match with the, so called, national ideal. In this sense, in many countries in transition even today there are tensions between the functions and requirements of the education system and values, interests and aspirations of the ethnic groups.

Such a complex situation is a challenge both for the education system, and the educational and cultural policies of the state. In recent years, traditional educational policies of the countries in transition, based on the assumption of one national culture, have come under the public scrutiny. Today, more and more countries in transition tolerate and encourage the expression of cultural diversity, because the multicultural and plural-ethnic population represents an important stronghold of democratic social integration. In that sense, a true multicultural education will respect demands of global and national integration, and specific needs of culturally different communities, at the same time (Banks, 2004). As such, it is based on the philosophy of humanistic pluralism, since the humanism is the ethos of evaluation of social reality of the cultural pluralism. However, the values of humanistic and cultural pluralism, which are necessary for the multicultural education, are often not articulated in our transitional social reality; therefore, they must be "nurtured" in the educational process, which will be enriched with them.

The first step in knowing about the constantly increasing complexity of the changes and developments around us, as well as in the struggle against the feeling of insecurity caused by the changes, is the adoption of an appropriate knowledge and information, and their articulation in the time perspective with a constant critical approach and experience of reality (Beck, 2007). Therefore, it is obvious that education is the reference point that should help everyone to become citizens of the changing world; there is no way for an individual to understand his/her reality, if he/she does not understand the importance of relations with *others*, and if he/she

does not understand their social reality. It does not mean that the already overburdened educational programs (particularly in Serbia) should include another subject. On the contrary, it is necessary to reorganize the existing courses concerning the general settings on the interpersonal relationships in a concrete social reality, in order to apply the knowledge in the everyday life and work of the individual, and make it a base of the lifelong education process.

Solidarity means overcoming introspective inclinations to pay all the attention to one's own identity, and attempt to understand others by respecting differences (Rorty, 1991). For that reason, the responsibility of education of the countries in transition is necessary, but often problematic. Therefore, an important task of education is cognition, transfer of knowledge and awareness of individuals of their own roots, which would enable them to define their place in the world, and also teach them to respect the other different cultures. In that sense, some of the subjects are specially important, such as history, which contents have always been in function of raising the national identity, highlighting differences and emphasizing the feeling of superiority. Viewed from another angle, presentation of historical contents which point to understanding and recognition that peoples, countries and even continents are not equal, will force us to step beyond the framework of our immediate experience, and accept and acknowledge the differences among people, discovering that the other people also have their history and culture, which is just as valuable, rich and instructive as ours. Acquaintance with other cultures leads us, therefore, to the comprehension of the uniqueness of our own culture, but also to the comprehension of the historical heritage of a common human kind in general.

In addition, to understand the *others* allows us to better know ourselves. Any form of identity is complex, since the individuals have been formed (both personally and socially) in the interactive relationship with other people (Taylor, 1998). When we realize that there are other possibilities of belonging, besides narrowly limited groups such as a family, a local community, and a national community, we will be encouraged in the search for common values which can form the basis of intellectual and moral solidarity of the mankind. Therefore, education in the countries in transition has a special responsibility to build a new, mutually permeated social discourse. It must help the creation process of a new humanism, containing an important ethical principle, which gives an importance to acquaintance with and respect for cultures and spiritual values of different civilizations. The feeling of common values and common destiny is actually the foundation on which any form of international cooperation must be based. Enabling everyone to have an access to the knowledge resources, education has exactly this universal mission – to help people to understand the world and to understand the *others*.

The basic dilemma of the problems of multicultural education, which exists not only in the countries in transition, is the following: if the purpose of education is to encourage and develop features in each individual, which will make him/her similar to others, or the education is a process that provides the right to existence and expression of one's own features!?. Similarly, it is certain that the process of mobility of people and ideas, and emergence of new information and communication technologies, have created new circumstances that hinder the individual to *grow up* into the independent and responsible person, which is the ultimate goal of the mission of all educational systems. The reaction to such a crisis

of identity, which is a consequence of these phenomena, is a fact that people are more likely to emphasize community identity based on ethnicity, nation, religion or the territory, what again obstructs the individual rights, freedom of choice and conscience, prudence and universality (Beck, 2007). These phenomena cause tension in relations among the nations-state-government-authorities-territory, becoming a great challenge to educational and cultural policies of the countries in transition, such as Serbia. In this regard, the efforts have been made to make a new concept - integration within a democracy, which will not impose a culture that would require from the members of ethnic communities to internalize the fundamental myths of their national culture. No nation has the exclusive right to values which are the cultural heritage of the entire mankind.

Taking into consideration a challenge of the new processes of collective identification and individual acculturation, schools must create knowledge and develop abilities necessary to the young people for the acceptance of universal things, not forgetting the roots of their own identity at the same time. For the harmonious development of the individual identity, 'personal' must be directed towards social, territorial, ethnic, linguistic and cultural origin, but also go beyond a situation called ethnocentrism. In other words, individuals must reconcile their social identity and freedom of choice of their own identity (the individual has the right to multiple identities) in order to understand the meaning of those identities in the contemporary society, include them in the wider world communities and treat them on the basis of two fundamental principles: one's own choice and freedom of conscience.

Conclusion

Since the educational discourse is most often caused by the requirements of the social discourse, the responsibility of the social community in the field of multiculturalism and democratization of education in general, cannot be ignored. It is probable that the responsibility of the society lies in the establishment of such an education policy, which will enable young people to develop and apply skills and competencies through experience. Those skills and competencies are necessary for synchronization of their individual rights with a general need to respect the rights of others. From the pedagogical point of view, it implies an attempt to understand particular and universal, complex and conflict, through interaction, and not only on the abstract level. According to J. Dewey, all of us have prejudices, and if someone claims that he does not have them, that claim is the worst prejudice (Dewey, 1971). The problem of intercultural education lays exactly in the fact that the prejudice of this type is impossible to neutralize with the rational approach. Therefore, probably, it is necessary to have new, concrete situations or well-arranged social steps of the policy of acceptance, which would prevent the previous causes of the problems in the relations between the society and the ethnic communities which belong to the society.

Such form of access requires a plan of cooperation with numerous partners outside the educational institutions, sine the educational institution can (and should) be the place where the pupils learn in practice how to be a citizen, under the condition of continuous development of skills for communication and responsible participation in one's own environment, as well as the ability for the partnership

relations and the teamwork with the *others* and different. Only in such a responsible social community, in such created educational policy and with the awareness of individuals that revealing of *others* is revealing of relations, and not the obstacle - it is possible to talk about policies of acceptance or about the intercultural education. In Serbia, which is a country in the process of transition, intercultural education is only a vision for now. The mission that lies ahead of it rests on Socrates' sentence that even after a bad harvest, it is necessary to sow.

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Assoc. Prof. Dr. Olivera Knezevic Floric
University of Novi Sad
Faculty of Philosophy
Serbia
flovera@ptt.rs

Stefan Ninkovic, Ph.D. student
University of Novi Sad
Faculty of Philosophy
Serbia
stefanninkovic985@gmail.com