

## **The whole child approach in the context of joint activities with children from a migration background**

**Abstract:** The article presents contemporary views on a new approach to children studies in social sciences and humanities, and particularly the “whole child approach” paradigm. The basic features of this approach are discussed in the context of integrating children from a migration background and their social functioning within the structure of education. A brief discussion on the necessary structural changes in social life and its adjustment to the needs of children is provided. The whole child approach is promoted as a key element of social cohesion strategies.

**Keywords:** whole child approach, children-centered approach, education of children from a migrant background, migration, intercultural education

### **Introduction**

In recent years, greater interest has been noticed in new research paradigms that – within the formal education framework, and more often outside this framework in the non-formal learning process – pay particular attention to bigger empowerment of a child (Śliwerski, 2001). It is not yet clearly visible in the school structure and functioning or the conduct of other institutions in educational systems, except for a few schools outside the public school network. Nevertheless, it is recognized in research projects conducted in Polish educational institutions. Academics had become though leaders of an inevitable turn towards more subjective and holistic approaches to school students as humans or more precisely nowadays partners of research and recognizing them as equal individuals in social relations. Such an approach is connected to the belief that children are the future in society and all deficiencies suffered in childhood may affect adult functioning and therefore disturb social cohesion. Social cohesion itself, understood as connectedness and solidarity among groups in society, is an essential part of modern society respecting the rights of individuals. As the Council of Europe maintains, in

an unstable world which is challenging traditional schemes of social bonding, the idea of social cohesion acquires greater importance in responding to people's needs for personal development and their connection with a fair and sustainable society (Council of Europe, 2005, p. 15). Empowerment of children shall serve the building of a better society.

### **Development of holistic children studies**

In Poland, there is a long tradition of giving children the rights to be fully-fledged partners in all relations within the educational system. The roots of this lie in the work of Janusz Korczak (Odroważ-Coates, 2018, p. 19). As Bogusław Śliwierski highlights: "Korczak, as one of few educators in the world, was able to demystify in practice mutual relations between adults and children; ensuring the conditions of real equality; enforcing coexistence based on dialogue and authentic self-management" (Śliwierski, 2017, p. 56). The preaching of John Paul II strengthened the fast development of so-called personalized pedagogy which concentrates on personal relations between the student and teacher (Chrobak and Frejusz, 2018, p. 226). The increase of interest in the research paradigm within the field of education that focused on the child as an object of intervention empowering them with subjectivity is demonstrated by the rising number of research and innovation initiatives that are child-centered by design. What is worth mentioning are the MiCREATE or Child Up projects conducted between 2018 and 2022 under the Horizon 2020 EU research and innovation program. Within the basis of this approach lies the assumption that the aim of schooling is the development of citizenship, the ability to ensure full development opportunities of all children within the school or the possibility to grow beyond their capabilities and finally overcome structural and social barriers, especially relating to inequalities and unbalanced access to knowledge

The whole child approach not only puts children at the center of attention of researchers and educational institutions assuming what is in children's best interest but goes much further by analyzing how stakeholders such as family members, educators, intercultural assistants, decision makers, social workers, and other members of society can foster the wellbeing and welfare of children and, in context of this article, foster the integration of children from a migration background and their educational acknowledgment and personal advancement. As it is, the development of five pillars of the whole child approach by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Develop-

ment – ASCD (formerly the Association for Curriculum Development and Supervision) – an international organization connecting educational experts from 128 countries, can be considered a milestone in the development of this paradigm. Within this concept, it is emphasized that every child in every school or community setting deserves to be kept in good health, safe against any threats, committed towards their surroundings and challenged to seize opportunities. This approach should be implemented into school structures, but also into the policies of the neighborhood or larger communities. In subsequent years, the Association created a support system for families, educators, and local communities for the whole child approach praxis. Several recommendations for the political process have also been developed to prompt a systemic shift in the education paradigm (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007).

### **Benefits of the whole child approach for migrant children**

Actually, the whole child approach paradigm is particularly useful in working with children from migration backgrounds as paying attention to the entire environment surrounding a child including their family, neighborhood, etc. can significantly and positively affect their integration in the host society. Presently, in the absence of state planned and implemented integration activities in the provinces, and with the exception of NGO activities limited most often to large cities, the adoption of the new paradigm, which provides a holistic analysis of the child as a person, is particularly important (Kościółek, 2020). Recent studies show how students with migration experience can take advantage of the whole child approach, which takes a more holistic approach to education, not only focusing on their school progress and cognitive skills, but also on children's extracurricular social functioning and emotional development. It has been revealed that students can be strongly involved in the learning process, achieve goals set by the school in accordance with its values, develop social skills, actively engage in school and local community life, and, finally, achieve educational success, whenever they evolve not only knowledge acquisition skills, but also when children are allowed to blossom emotionally, psychologically and physically (Hamilton, 2013; Krachman, LaRocca and Gabrieli, 2018).

All students should have access to high-quality and inclusive education that prepares them for their future living in the host society. As it is emphasized: “The education system resembles the immigration system as both of

them are strongly influenced by the meritocratic principles of achievement and selection in terms of social adjustment or mismatch, creating a similar interpretive framework for the social rules of belonging and membership” (Albański, 2020, p. 148). The method of assessing progress in the Polish education system as well as the knowledge acquired by children from a migration background does not correspond with the multicultural environment of the contemporary schools as they still do not notice and acknowledge the diversity of students. Polish traditional schools also forfeit the unique skills of migrant children, especially those gained in other educational systems, deriving from their cultural background or related to multilingualism.

In Poland, children from a migration background are constantly being marginalized, however, children who are returnees, despite their citizenship are ignored by the system (Bulandra, Kościótek, Majcher-Legawiec, Pamuła-Behrens and Szymańska, 2019). This makes implementing an approach that considers the child as a whole, including their past experiences, their new relations established in the host society, and the possible impact of external stakeholders, so much more important. Paying attention to the clusters closest to a child, such as the family, can help in integrating them into the new community. There is no doubt that parents play one of the most important roles in the education of their children encouraging or discouraging them in their learning achievements but also creating a communicative channel between the school and its students. The facilitation of parents’ involvement may help children in the adaptation process. This is particularly important as migrations in Poland are predominantly economic ones and parents of children residing in Poland reserve little time for their children as work consumes most of their daily activities. For that reason, it is indispensable to affirm the role of other members of the family, creating connections with neighbours or setting up peer relations. Grandparents, if they migrate along with their grandchildren, are often underestimated as facilitators of children’s feelings of safety or maintaining language and tradition (Hennel-Brzozowska, 2019). Another important factor concerns the active involvement of local communities in the school life of both the institution and children, as it is told: “When schools and their communities work together, their resources are used most effectively and the needs of the entire community can be identified and met more cost-effectively” (Lewallen, Hunt, Potts-Datema, Zaza and Giles, 2015, p. 736). The whole child approach was created and developed in the USA, but in recent years it is practiced in numerous countries, particularly and intensively in Europe. The author hereof is happy that the

Horizon 2020 program project was implemented in Poland in 2021. One of its basic methodological assumptions is in fact the whole child approach. The new ABC – Networking the Educational World: Across Boundaries for Community-building – is managed by the University of Bologna; in Poland it is implemented by the Interkulturalni PL Association in Kraków (European Commission).

### **Problems in implementation of the approach in the Polish context**

It should be highlighted that the mental and physical health of children is one of the most important indicators of the whole child approach, although often ignored in practice. It has been demonstrated that only healthy children are predisposed to educational success without additional support or counselling. This is particularly important in the Polish context where health or dental care is not accessible to most children in the school building. There are also only a few schools that employ psychologists or other counsellors who speak foreign languages and can communicate with children who are at the beginning of the adaptation process and have no advanced language abilities. Such a situation is always stressful and requires an adequate response from support services. Despite the fact that the public discussion on gaps in psychiatric and psychological healthcare for children has been ongoing for many years now, it has not brought expected results, and child psychiatry is still underfunded and lacks personnel. Paying significant attention to children's health in this paradigm is key and there has been shifting potential at the political level. This desire was elaborated on in a joint report by the ASCD and US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2015. The authors of the report even claimed that “previous approaches did not explicitly describe the critical role of day-to-day practices and processes or the essential role of policy in sustaining a school environment that supports both health and learning” (Lewallen, Hunt, Potts-Datema, Zaza and Giles, 2015, p. 730).

Contemporary education systems, including the Polish one, are strongly rooted in the traditional teaching practices of reading, writing, mathematics and other “key subjects”. Such an approach to education does not translate directly into achieving success in future life. The contemporary, dynamically-developing and unstable world requires a new and better paradigm of educational practices, such as a whole child approach that covers education and more importantly the involvement of the local community in the process

itself. The social change to abandon standardized testing and to comprehend teaching and learning as a more holistic task is not easy to engineer and will require political will. However, as it is stated: “There is a growing appreciation of the need to teach and help the development of the whole person as opposed to merely focusing on academic achievement and test scores” (Slade and Griffith, 2013, p. 24). The only effective education systems to last are those that adapt to the demands of the present, focus on the development of children’s creativity, problem-solving skills, and facilitate cooperation through a personalized approach to students, also depart from the standardization of educational achievement, in which children are forced to memorize large amounts of useless information and have their educational success measured only through tests and exams. Such a change is especially important for children from a migration experience. The present curriculum rarely encompasses their needs and does not take into account language barriers, nor their past, often significantly different educational experiences and possible problems with integration in the host environment (Liew and McTigue, 2010, p. 466). Another problem stems from cultural schemes of education, often driven by prejudice, ethnocentrism and cultural abuse, affecting children with different cultural backgrounds and diminishing their self-confidence and sense of security. It is extremely difficult to change the historical narrative included in the school curriculum, however, it is possible in joint learning projects conducted by peers. In such a method, concurring narratives can provide a sense of dialogue. In the MiCREATE project, one of the most important postulates made by teachers and experts was adhering to team work as a basic type of learning in class (Bulandra, Kościółek and Legawiec, 2019, p. 29).

The whole child approach gives special attention to the role of the teacher as a profession of public trust, in which teachers takes responsibility for the future of the children under their care. As emphasized, teachers should be able “to teach in congruence with their moral purpose, i.e. so that students would understand and learn to promote their personal development and growth, not only for favorable exam scores or other externally set conditions of progress” (Sahlberg, 2010:49). No doubt teachers play a clear role in building social capital in local communities, so it is worth supporting them in activities aimed at a personalized approach to school children and a holistic view of their functioning at school and within the local environment. Relationships established between teachers, parents and other members of the community should be based on mutual responsibility and trust (Sahlberg, 2007).

Considering the connections between the whole child approach and services focused on children from a migration background, it might be said that such children are cross-discriminated in a double exclusion process: firstly, because they are children, and secondly, because they are migrants. As children, they are treated as adults' objects of concern, they are denied personal autonomy, and their cultural, linguistic, ethnic, religious, etc. diversity can be assessed as a barrier in education or upbringing frames, both at school and, more broadly, in the local community. The child's perspective is often overlooked in migration and integration discourse, and as a result children become invisible and are not recognized as causative entities. As it is emphasized: "This is caused by the belief that is rooted in the typical view of the child and childhood that – regardless of the circumstances of migration – the child's situation is similar, i.e. they are in a position of dependence on the adult guardian" (Albański, 2020, p. 12).

## Conclusions

This false narration is increasingly dynamically challenged in the contemporary social sciences. In child research, emphasis is given to the recognition of children's voices and views analyzed from a perspective that is not adult-centric anymore. In this sense, researchers must consider all issues straightforward, without paternalism and re-enactment. One of the most innovative research projects conducted in this century under the Horizon 2020 EU program are following this path. In the MiCREATE project, researchers are trying to learn from children their aspirations and voices to create better educational solutions and opportunities, crafted specifically for these children's needs. All these solutions need to be flexible enough to serve all children, also those who will come next.

The contemporary approach to child studies showed a substantive shift in the methodology and objectives of the research. There are no presumptions or imposed theses that need to be verified by traditional scientific methods. They are superseded by carefully designed activities concerned with involving children in the process, letting them speak out and show their aspirations. With this knowledge, practical solutions are designed to facilitate aforementioned social cohesion through consultation with children and other relevant stakeholders. Innovative models of research are introduced, such as co-creation methods or PAR paradigm. Children become equal citizens that need to be heard as it is the future that belongs to them. In migration studies, such

an approach is particularly important as most children do not migrate voluntarily, however they often integrate faster and deeper than their parents. If they come across modern and effective support services which know how to challenge them, it will be an unprecedented opportunity to create equal chances for them to enter their adolescence and adult life with the full use of personal capabilities. Every child's success is worth all of our research effort in order to make it feasible as this allows us all to prevent social problems, pathologies, and inequalities.

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