

# Reflective Identity of Students/Future Teachers – Chances and Hopes for Shaping a New Educational and Social Reality

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Drawing upon Giddens's theory of structuration, the works of Castells and Polish intercultural education, the author focuses on the relationship between installing in future teachers what we will call a 'reflective identity' and the creation of a new educational and social reality, thus contributing to transforming the whole social structure.

## Introduction

In the contemporary world, which is undergoing both an economic crisis and a crisis of multiculturalism, and which is full of cultural, social, religious, political and military conflicts, education becomes a chance for building mechanisms and habits of coexistence, for developing problem-solving skills, and for seeking and improving potential ways to dialogue. Education, then, is not just a process of instilling knowledge but also a process of becoming a true human being. Special significance should be attributed here to intercultural education, which

enhances such development of humanity in which each human becomes a fully conscious and creative member of the family, local, regional, religious, national, continental, cultural and global, planetary community, and becomes capable of active self-fulfilment of his/her own unique and durable identity and distinctiveness.<sup>1</sup>

In the long run, intercultural education holds out a chance for reducing xenophobia and nationalism, the implementation of the idea of agreement, exchange and cultural borrowing (based on the humanistic principles of the coexistence of people shaped by various cultures) – in short, bringing about social change.

To develop my argument, I will draw primarily on Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration,<sup>2</sup> Manuel Castell's works<sup>3</sup> and the concepts of intercultural education

of Tadeusz Lewowicki<sup>4</sup> and Jerzy Nikitorowicz.<sup>5</sup> My thesis will be that modern societies need citizens with the ability to reflect. Teachers who themselves project a reflective identity can directly (as leaders of social activities) and indirectly (by influencing their pupils/students, shaping their identities) foster a positive change. The ability to reflect allows individuals to use new categories in a more controlled and purposeful way as well as to handle current problems.

### **Shaping the Reflective Identity of Future Teachers**

The transformations of the world initiated by modernity bring about both the disappearance of the ontological safety of humanity and the birth of existential anxiety. In these circumstances an awareness of the many dimensions of one's identity (local, national, civil, European, global) comes to redefine the social position of the individual and contributes to the transformation of the whole social structure.

In Giddens's approach,<sup>2</sup> identity must be generated and maintained by an individual acting reflectively. The creation of such identity requires both the subject's own activity and that of different groups, institutions and organizations fostering socio-cultural standards and desired models of identity and personality. The individual, then, is not a puppet driven by structural conditions but a thinking and reflective creature with considerable autonomy and self-awareness.

Transformations in individual lives have always been related to the necessity of mental reorganization. In modern social systems, identity changes demand discovering and constructing oneself within a reflective process in which the personal transformation is interwoven with the social one. What gains particular significance in this context is the intercultural dimension. Contemporary people shape their individual identities in a world of changing cultures – a world in which integrative or unifying tendencies clash with tendencies toward autonomy, separateness or sovereignty.

Since 1992, over 75 works have been published in the series 'Edukacja Międzokulturowa (Intercultural Education)' by the Faculty of Ethnology and Education of the University of Silesia. Many publications on this subject matter have also been issued by, for example, the University of Białystok and the University of Opole.

From the perspective of intercultural education, identity is

a developing, dynamic phenomenon, open to unceasing creation, an act of becoming, a complex and changeable phenomenon, a multidimensional construct which combines the elements of the individual's personality system with the central values of the culture of the group to which the individual belongs and with conscious participation in the timeless values of the European and global culture.<sup>6</sup>

A change in human mentality and attitudes is the effect of a long process since it requires a lot of effort and perseverance in overcoming existing stereotypes, barriers, and outer and inner difficulties. Fulfilling the mission of serving people and society, a teacher can and should be a co-designer of changes. Success in this depends on the intellectual and moral attitudes of teachers, their joint efforts, the input of some business entities, and favourable legal regulations. Of crucial significance for shaping a new educational and social reality is that teachers be equipped with a reflective identity.

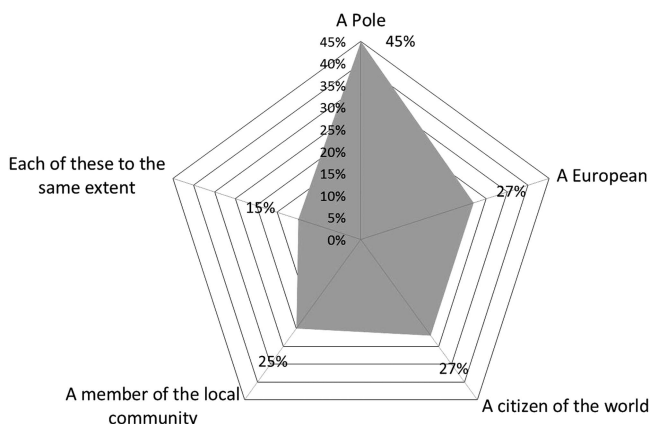
The author of the current article carried out in 2011–2014 a series of multivariate studies under the grant ‘To learn from others and to teach others – the teacher’s work in multicultural conditions’, funded by the National Science Centre in Cracow, University of Silesia, Faculty of Ethnology and Education in Cieszyn, Project No. N N106 416640. In the current study, the empirical material is interpreted in a different way from the author’s earlier publications.

The study involved a representative group of 1268 people (1229 women and 39 men) in early adulthood, students of pedagogy at universities situated both in borderlands and in the centre of Poland, and in environments with diversified GDPs. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were applied.<sup>7</sup> The qualitative data were collected in focus group interviews (12 focus groups were interviewed in which 84 people took part). The quantitative data were obtained by questionnaires. The quantitative data were analysed with a few simple and some more complex methods (e.g. factor analysis or cluster analysis). Interpretivism was used to analyse the qualitative data due to the assumption that the examined people (from the perspective of current or remembered experiences) gave meaning to facts by constructing mental maps, theories concerning Others, their own selves and their professional careers.<sup>8</sup>

Because this material was obtained from a cross-section of the whole generation of future teachers it enables comparisons and generalizations.

In quantitative studies, an attempt was made to specify the profile/type of future teachers’ identities with, as the most direct question: ‘Who do you feel you are?’ (see Figure 1).

The analysis of the responses shows that the identification in the category ‘a Pole’ is the strongest – 45%, followed by ‘a European’ and ‘a citizen of the world’ – both 27%, ‘a member of the local community’ – 25%, with 15% of respondents ranging themselves under several categories. The strong national identification is an indicator of distinctness and the bonds with the national community. National culture is the deepest layer protecting the individual’s sovereignty in the internal dimension.



**Figure 1.** The feeling of identity of future teachers. The distribution of responses to the question: ‘Who do you feel you are?’ (Source: own research.)

National identification should be viewed as the next stage of rooting, which takes place on the basis of the family and local heritage. The Polish national identity is strictly associated with the European identity. This results mostly from: the position of Poland in the centre of the continent, the common cultural foundation of the whole of Europe, common Jewish Christian ideas, and a similar system of values.

Belonging to a community and the obligations which result from this are confronted with the possibility of the individual creation of one's own life. As a consequence, a multitude of dimensions opens in which one can view and describe oneself. The classical question 'Who am I?' is answered: 'I am a Pole', 'I am a European', 'I am a member of a local community', 'I am a citizen of the world'. Apart from tradition or reasoning, one's own experience lays the foundation of one's identity. This experience is a source of self-knowledge and forms a reference system towards other people. Fifteen percent of the respondents identify themselves in many dimensions simultaneously. Some of them consciously shape/construct their identity on the basis of two or more cultural identifications; they function in many dimensions and their identity is associated with these dimensions. What seems to be shaped in this way is a model of an enriched, reflective identity, in which the national identity is broadened with regional, European and global identifications.

A multidimensional identity is regarded as one of the major aims of intercultural education and the obtained result can be treated as an indicator of success in the implementation of this education. Numerous studies confirm that wherever it is pursued, it enhances the construction of the multidimensional identity of youth and adults – future teachers.<sup>9,10</sup> A multidimensional identity may be treated as a certain type/level of constructing reflective identity. As M. Castells notes, a reflective identity 'appears when, out of the available cultural materials, social actors build a new identity, which redefines their position in the society, and – by doing this – they aim at the transformation of the whole social structure' (Ref. 3, p. 24).

In the context of the theoretical studies and research undertaken, reflecting on the identity of prospective teachers and their contribution to social and educational changes is necessary because how teachers understand or interpret themselves is related to their understanding of the world, their relationships with others in this world, and the pedagogical activities in which they will engage.

To use just one research methodology has its obvious limitations. In fact, the goal, the subject matter, and the determinants of the research envisaged demanded that both quantitative and qualitative methods be used, complementary to each other. The triangulation of methods (through the use of several methods to investigate the same problem) and the triangulation of data (enabling data analysis from different standpoints) allowed for the avoidance of limitations resulting from the application of just one methodology.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the qualitative method, in the form of focus group interviews (FGI) technique,<sup>12</sup> was used to obtain in-depth knowledge of the attitudes of future teachers to different matters, and of the hidden motives of their conduct.<sup>13</sup>

Purposive sampling was applied in all interview groups – the respondents were students of pedagogy, with as specialization pre- and early school education. Altogether, 12 interviews were conducted with six to seven people taking part in each

focus group interview – 84 people in total. Collecting the data by narrative interview and their processing (from the perspective of an experiencing agent) enable the analysis of individual experiences associated with the shaping of one's own identity. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, noting also articulation stops, digressions, topic changes, intonation, etc.

The next step was the analysis of the qualitative data. Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman distinguish three ways to approach such an analysis: interpretivism, social anthropology and cooperative social studies, the first of which – interpretivism – was applied in the research here described (Ref. 8, pp. 8–9). Data representations constitute another element of analytic work. What was applied here were popular forms of data representation: purposive sampling and an appropriate presentation of broader quotations from the respondents' narrations.<sup>14</sup> The obtained data were treated as the illustration of the quantitative research results, the material that helped to verify and interpret the results.

All focus group interviews were carried out in a natural environment: classrooms (due to the lack of professional focus group rooms) equipped with appropriate recording appliances (video cameras used in off-vision mode, voice recorders, audio-video recorders). In this way the principle of naturalness, which is binding in qualitative studies, was followed as well as the principle of the synergic-participatory model of pedagogical studies.<sup>15</sup>

Appropriately trained young scholars familiarized with the applications of this method served as moderators. They had no experience in conducting focus group interviews. This may have been a disadvantage. Yet it also had the advantage that they were cognitively open and positively motivated, and had easy contact with the students – often the same group they regularly work with, which created a natural situation far removed from the artificiality of interviews conducted in a focus group room by experienced moderators who often model or manipulate situations and statements. The moderators led the discussion (after a thorough familiarization with the research problems of the project) and participated in it. On average, focus group interviews lasted 90 minutes.

In the focus group interview, the following properties of group dynamics were used as the factors generating the empirical data: the synergy effect (due to interactions, the set of generated data is the product, not the sum); the 'snowball' effect, in which one participant's utterance triggers the others' utterances as mutual reactions; mutual stimulation – a significant enhancement of the researcher's influence through mutual observations and interactions between the interviewees; stronger feeling of safety due to group-shared responsibility for clearly expressed opinions; and spontaneity through arranging situations which resemble daily life more than individual questionnaires do.<sup>16</sup> The results of the qualitative studies confirm the results of the quantitative studies – they indicate signs of reflective identity, reflective practice and professionalism.

Among other topics, future teachers shared their opinions about their own experiences, prospects of self-development, and the implementation of their mission. They also outed their fears associated with fulfilling this mission and handling their professional career. One of the interviewees said:

It seems to me that if someone doesn't feel the vocation to be a teacher, s/he won't learn this during pedagogical studies, s/he might become a teacher but will burn out in this job quickly. Although I had chosen pedagogical studies by chance, during their course I understood that being a real educational professional is a valuable mission. (Interview 4, interviewee 8)

Another student added:

I think that the most important thing in a school teacher's work is consulting, help in solving the newly emerging and existing problems at school. A school teacher should support learners, gain their trust, assist them in hard moments, as well as motivate and encourage them to act. A teacher must show concern for learners. S/he should devote all his/her heart to this job and love what s/he does. (Interview 4, interviewee 4)

An inalienable aspect of what people do is their ability to understand their own acts. The subject's ability to reflect is incessantly interwoven into the process of social daily behaviour. This is a particularly important trait for teachers, whose aims are to animate social activities, to activate social powers, and to limit the existing threats or eliminate them. One of the examined students said:

Once, long before starting university studies, I viewed this career as something entirely different than now if I were to judge it. It seemed much easier to me. Still, nothing is more misleading. A teacher must have the elements of a psychologist and a parent to educate the learners so that they can become people who respect others and themselves. (Interview 8, interviewee 4)

Educational and social changes depend on the intellectual and professional condition of teachers. Shaping the reflective identity of future teachers seems required in the face of the disappearing ontological safety of humanity, growing crises, and increasing risks of various kinds. This allows the individual to think, choose a lifestyle, and better handle current situations, threats and problems. Future teachers notice both the potentialities and threats resulting from these changes. This is illustrated by the following statement:

The teacher is an important person in creating the identity of a young person, who has many questions and doubts, and the teacher as a guide should be ready to answer these questions and help in making choices. The teacher's career requires appropriate pre-dispositions (understanding, friendly, tolerant, communicative, honest, responsible, sensitive, disciplined, creative, patient, able to listen efficiently). These days a good teacher is hard to find because this career is getting commercialized, it is becoming a career like all others, not a mission or vocation. How are we to educate other people, help them, develop their personality, undertake any educational activities, if we actually have no idea who they are, what they feel and what views they believe in? The basis for the work of a good teacher is getting to know the person, his/her needs, listening to what s/he has to say. Without such an attitude, we are not entitled to call ourselves good teachers, we have no right to teach how to educate others, the image of teaching will be incomplete, distorted, inappropriate. (Interview 10, interviewee 1)

Future teachers can see the value of living, acting and working in a diversified environment as well as the possibilities of drawing experience from contacts with others:

Despite the danger of emerging conflicts, functioning in a particular culturally diversified environment, like a school, creates many chances for development. In a differentiated community, you can learn not only tolerance and respect but also, and maybe mostly, how to draw from Others' experience and how to see the surrounding reality through different eyes. (Interview 2, interviewee 7)

The human ability to understand one's own actions and the capability of change and creating a new reality are a few of the inalienable qualities that people have. There is some hope that the activities of teachers who possess a reflective identity will not only result in preventive benefits (in the form of preventing various pathologies and dysfunctions in social life) but will also have constructive effects in the building of future intellectual elites. What can be expected is that a teacher with a reflective identity will be a skilful organizer and supervisor of the educational process at school, a social activist, and an educational researcher. Moreover, the intercultural education implemented by such a teacher may become a field of practice in which the discussed models can be successfully implemented and introduced into daily life by shaping the habits of pupils/students.

### Conclusions

Modern times have brought about various challenges and threats to everyday life. Pedagogical undertakings should aim at experiencing and understanding this reality, instigate social changes, and strive to constantly help pupils/students to understand their own selves and the world, pursuing the goal of integration, and the peaceful coexistence of people and cultures. The superior goal is to encourage reflection, which enhances the individual's own identity. The civil obligation of teachers, then, is to diagnose all threats and come up with remedies, responding to the idea of Helena Radlińska,<sup>17</sup> a forerunner of Polish social pedagogy, that the human world should be built with human powers in a spirit of humanitarianism, justice and equality.

Intercultural education facilitates the popularization of new attitudes to people and cultures, and prepares for a dialogue in the interactions with representatives of other cultures. The *sine qua non* of its success is preparing future teachers for understanding the contemporary world, for understanding social behaviours, for acting and counteracting against various social threats and problems, and mobilizing human powers.

Without doubt, the numerous studies carried out in Poland and worldwide have confirmed that education does not guarantee a state of societal well-being. Yet, under certain conditions and thanks to the activities of well-prepared teachers, education may lead to social equality and justice. The quality of education to a large extent depends on teachers, their individual traits and qualifications.

It should not be doubted that contemporary people, who live in a complex reality full of contradictions and face a clash between their fragile human identity and polymorphic globalization, have to find new answers to the existential questions of How to live? Who am I? Who am I to be? How do I find a path for myself when this path is strewn with ambiguous road signs?

The results of the research here described indicate that it is worth supporting the process of constructing a reflective, enriched identity for future teachers. It seems that people who possess reflective abilities can fulfil the teacher's role better – they will assist their learners in the acquisition of a reflective identity and will contribute to the shaping of a generation of open, sensitive and conscious people who will become the co-designers of the educational and social reality.

Constructing a reflective identity, which involves training and reflection on the part of future teachers, is a positive phenomenon, resulting from the transformations in their mentality and attitudes. Education is aimed at building future intellectual elites. The significance of intercultural education – as implemented in various academic centres in Poland – for the course and quality of the life of individuals, groups and communities, cannot be overestimated. From the individual's standpoint, this becomes a chance for skilful moving about in the modern world, for the creative construction of one's own life, and for active citizenship (viewed in the regional, national or European dimension). Intercultural education has also become a determinant of maintaining demands in the economic marketplace which are constantly growing.

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