

Képzés és Gyakorlat

Training & Practice

19. évfolyam, 2021/3-4. szám

Képzés és Gyakorlat

A Magyar Agrár- és Élettudományi Egyetem Kaposvár Campus Neveléstudományi Intézetének
és a Soproni Egyetem Benedek Elek Pedagógiai Karának
neveléstudományi folyóirata

19. évfolyam 2021/3–4. szám

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Volume 19, 2021 Issue 3-4.

Jelen kiadvány az „*EFOP-3.6.1-16-2016-00018 – A felsőoktatási rendszer K+F+I szerepvállalásának növelése intelligens szakosodás által Sopronban és Szombathelyen*” című projekt támogatásával valósult meg.

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DOI: 10.17165/TP.2021.3-4.1

BENCÉNÉ FEKETE, ANREA¹

Intercultural Education in Early Childhood

The acceptance of a diverse world begins with recognition at an early stage in life. However, not everyone steps out of their home with an empathic approach and this is why intercultural education should start as early as possible. The main objective of the study is to introduce the opportunities inherent in fairy tales from the perspective of intercultural education via the introduction of fairy tales dealing with multiple aspects of being different; and to introduce the practices applied in the Hungarian educational environment. The tales are analyzed with the method of content analysis, with special respect to diversity and cultural differences; then their educational applicability is analyzed based on the conclusions that can be drawn. The paper introduces the threats and opportunities of applying tales in intercultural education at a very young age, suggesting fairy tales to be used actively, but with suitable professionalism.

1. Introduction

Children are born without prejudices. Preconceptions may come from parents, friends, teachers and from the media as well. The first platform of socialization is the family, where children learn norms, which, however, can be variable from family to family. This is why institutional socialization has a very important role, in which children acquire uniform social norms. My goal is to start multicultural education as early in life as possible, to prevent prejudices brought from the family being transmitted into the community by the children.

Multicultural education starts with entering the society, but first of all it depends on the family; and parents are crucial elements of it. Starting kindergarten opens a new world, however many children arrive with ethnocentric views, accepting only their own norms. These children may sometimes be aggressive, but most often their feelings are generated within the family so with the young ones' help we may form the parents' views as well (Bencéné, 2009).

Multicultural education is the first step to abolish stereotypes. It is referred to as a strategy of educational policy and a toolbar of pedagogy that can be used for the integration of minorities in kindergartens and in schools.

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We have to provide equal chances to all minorities by assuring to have equal opportunities in education. One of the mainstream topics today is whether integration or segregation is the solution. Integration is very important but segregation has its advantages too. We need to find a balance between segregation and integration, both must be present at the same time in the institutional education in the form of early preschool development programs and remedial education programs.

The goal of the study is to introduce the methods successfully applied by Hungarian educational institutions in early-childhood, where fairy tales are utilized in multicultural education. These methods are integrated in the higher educational system of pedagogues as well, to enable trainee pedagogues practice the new methodology in real-life environment as well.

2. Background

Cultural diversity is also becoming characteristic of Hungary, and the need for intercultural communication is also increasing in public education institutions, as children from minority groups are increasingly present in the classrooms.

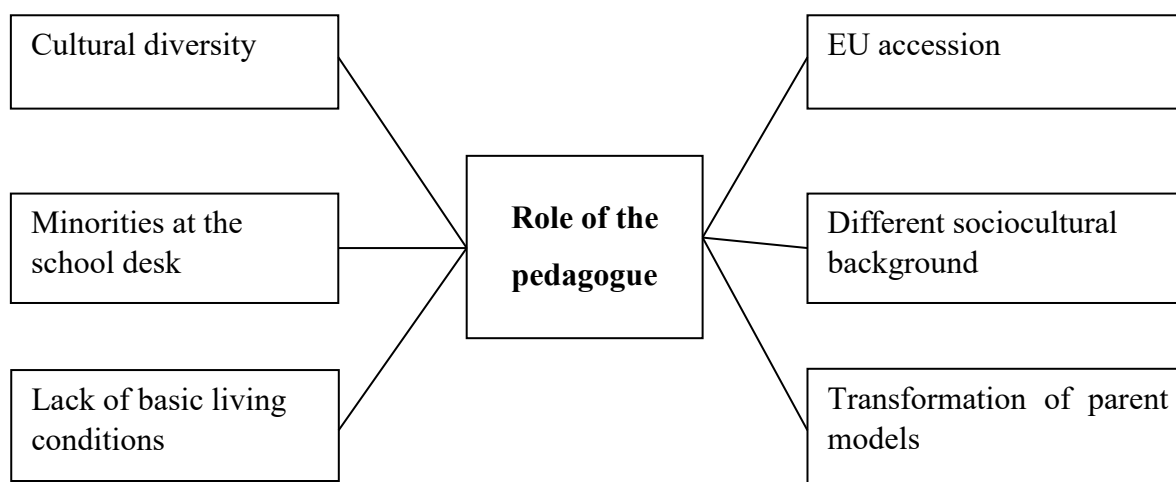


Figure 1. – Problem identification (own figure)

With the accession to the European Union, multicultural education has become a more and more actual topic in Hungary, but its timeliness was born at the moment when different cultures appeared on Earth and will last until they disappear. As an educator, we must first and foremost understand what roles the economy and society of the 21st century expect from the rising generation.

After many years of struggling, we have to see that the standard of the sociocultural environment from which students come is plummeting. There is more and more hunger and even complete neglect among children. If the basic conditions are not in place for subsistence, we have no chance of achieving results in teaching. The transformation of parenting models also creates an unfavorable situation for work at school. In this new situation, educational institutions, educators and parents also need to open up. After mapping the social situation of our time, it becomes clear that we need to address the differences in children's sociocultural environments. We must strive to ensure that the school provides equal opportunities for all children, sometimes from different cultures (Bencéné, 2011).

In Hungary, several stages of development of multicultural education can be observed; despite the fact that educational institutions did not address this issue for a long time, educators were not familiar with this concept. Although efforts have been made in the past, there was no talk at all about the educational situation of children belonging to minority groups during socialism. The transformation took place after the change of regime, when our educational leaders realized that minority groups have different needs and the reason for their school failure presumably lies in uniform education. First of all, school difficulties that caused problems for the largest minority group, the Roma, began to be identified; nowadays, however, attention is already focused on the difficulties of other minority groups too. Following the new educational principles, they are already looking for solutions for the schooling problems of children with disabilities and children from poor socio-cultural backgrounds, so that segregated education is not the only solution for them. Nowadays, integration and inclusion are a general aspiration and an expectation, but the actual solution is still to come.

Inclusive education means a real, internally born acceptance and acceptance of minority groups. In this case, education focuses on the values, relying primarily on the positive personality traits of the students. True inclusion is based on understanding, acceptance, and empathy. Several educational programs have already appeared to improve learning opportunities. It is a social goal to avoid reproduction in the event of disadvantage. Accession to the European Union had a positive effect on the situation of multicultural education in Hungary, as tenders were issued in connection with the National Development Plan (Bencéné, 2015).

Within the framework of the program, educational institutions held project days and weeks that convey multicultural content, developed a program of nationalities and ethnicities, and presented the peculiarities of different cultures in subjects (Torgyik, 2005). In the development of intercultural knowledge, according to Judit Hidasi (2004, p. 142), the most important thing

is not how deeply students know other cultures, but to what extent they have mastered intercultural communication and how internalized the rules of human contact have become for them. The development of intercultural sensitivity and the development of intercultural competence are of outstanding importance in education. This level can be reached by conscious, early-life multicultural family and institutional education, therefore, it would be very important for the development of intercultural competences to start in kindergarten and then continue in primary school (Bencéné – Bence, 2015).

In the studies of Sándor Kovács (1997), multicultural education is referred to as a strategy of educational policy and a toolbar of pedagogy that can be used for the integration of minorities. Judit Torgyik (2005) uses this concept in a broader view; she sees it as a change, an attitude that expects not only sensitivity towards different races, cultures or groups, but includes a brand new aspect that takes difference as a value.

Schools working with multicultural moral are typical of inclusivity and unconditional acceptance. They do not make a selection among children, and do not exclude the ones bearing with special abilities; they do not reject to educate children belonging to minority groups. A multicultural institution has sensitivity for the needs of special groups, creates an adopting social atmosphere and provides a unique, culturally considerate viewpoint. However, this attitude has a future only if parents, students and teachers cooperate. There is a need for a child-centered educational program, highly-educated pedagogues, multicultural curriculums and equipment; but continuous cooperation with parents is also crucial (Torgyik-Karlovitz, 2006, p. 32).

As nowadays more and more students struggling with such problems get into the schools, inclusivity should have an increasing role in everyday life. In multicultural education a new aspect appears, which takes students' specialties into account as a whole, regardless from being social, cultural or biological. They create an adopting atmosphere based on these features, which means that all people taking part in the education accept and respect these qualities (Torgyik, 2005).

3. Fairy tale pedagogy

“The tale does not lead away from reality, as many think, but leads to it, leads deep into the contents of spiritual reality, be it love and hate, the life and death mentioned above, good and evil, struggle” (Vekerdy, 2016).

When listening to a story, a storytelling trance is created, which is an intensely focused attention. In this process, the text heard is transformed into inner images and therefore it thoroughly moves the imagination and the inner world (Boldizsár, 1999). In today's world, this is hugely important, as children spend some of their time in the world of digital gadgets from an early age, such as television, tablet, smartphone, and media-mediated views, decisively influencing children's attitudes towards their peers.

The "gateway to tales" can only be effectively opened up by consciously selecting content that is currently of interest to children (e.g. friendship, siblings, human body), thus effectively developing intra- and interpersonal, emotional, logical, spatial, physical, linguistic and musical intelligence areas (Bajzáth, 2015). In the English-speaking world, the tale is used primarily in the teaching of formulation, and the importance of the folk tale is emphasized in the acquisition of the mother tongue. Guroian (1998) highlights the moral educational effect of folk tales and the fact that children need to be taught what the true values are.

Tales awaken the moral imagination, with which children themselves come to the realization (Guroian, 1998). In the German-speaking world, the application of folk tales in multicultural groups begins already in preschool age, but tales are pushed out of the lives of the older ones (Guerrero, 2006). According to Kay Lorenz, the tale develops language, social competence and resilience through the creation of internal resources through the transmission of core values. Listening to fairy tales develops the imagination, arouses the desire to learn, and stories are also good tools for integration (Lorenz, 2012). Tales from different countries can be a starting point for intercultural education. By identifying with the different fairy tale characters, children can relive different feelings over and over again. This also trains them for the real life situation. By taking many different points of view in role play, the ability of children to put themselves in the shoes of others and to perceive situations from the other person's point of view increases, which is a prerequisite for an increase in understanding and harmony in social interaction (Guerrero, 2006).

4. Intercultural fairy tales

Children can learn tolerance and acceptance through fairy tales. However, it is very important to choose the right tale, which matches the age characteristics of the children. Through explanation and discussion of a given tale they can understand that all people are different, everyone has an equal right to life, to learning, everyone has to accept the others and everyone has to help each other. The key to tolerance is understanding, experiencing the problem on one's

own. It is very important that the child does not only listen to the story but also expresses his or her own thoughts on the topic. However, this requires age-appropriate storytelling methods that help to express thoughts related to the topic indirectly, without the child noticing.

It is essential to help the children understand the multicultural aim with carefully chosen tasks. They can compare the different lifestyles, cultures and traditions. Up-to-date idea of the pedagogues about multicultural education is a must in this case.

Talking about the meaning of the tale is followed by dramatization, drawing or playing situational games with puppets. It is very important for children in the process of understanding to have their own experience, which is realized with the help of an adult. This pedagogical program might help to accept differences and multicultural tales can make up for missing education; it may shape values and show a pattern. But as Figure 2 illustrates, this method, if not applied well, may have some dangers too. Wrong interpretation may create a distorted image and may transmit a negative message, which may be unconscious in many cases, therefore, the educator's explanatory, guiding role in experiencing the tale is important.

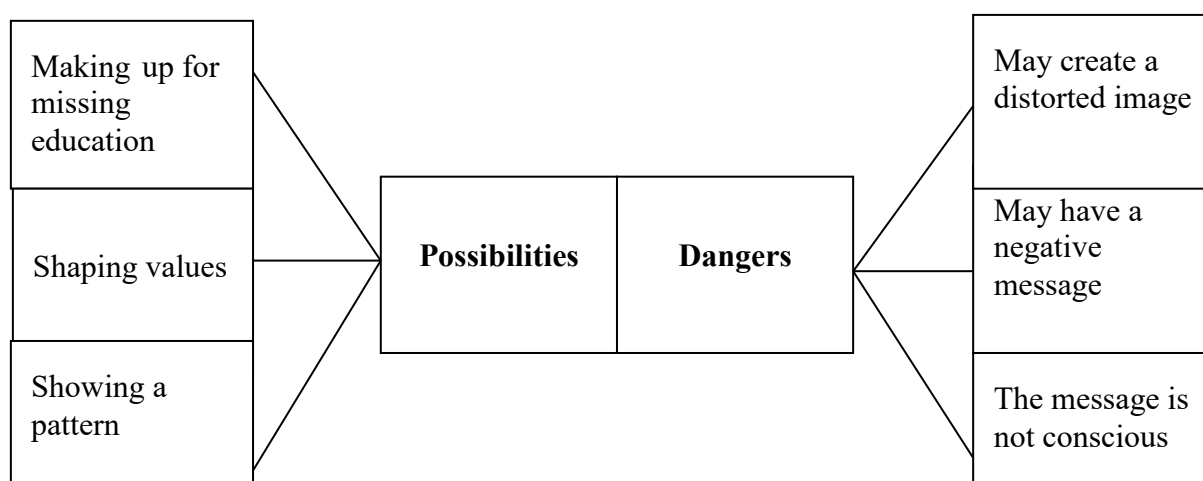


Figure 2 - The impact of multicultural tales (own figure)

There are three groups of multicultural tales: one group helps prevent racial and national discrimination, the second group draws attention to the values of people with disabilities and the third group points out that there are people who are different from others, but still just as valuable.

<p><u>Racial, national discrimination</u></p> <p>The book's title: <i>Little man's color</i></p> <p>Writer: <i>Gyula Böszörményi</i></p> <p>Drawings: <i>Írisz Agócs</i></p>	<p><u>Group of people with disabilities</u></p> <p>The book's title: <i>Lili is a little girl with down syndrome</i></p> <p>Writer: <i>Agnes Lacor – Gwen Le Gac</i></p>	<p><u>Otherness</u></p> <p>The book's title: <i>Lenka</i></p> <p>Writer and drawings: <i>Katalin Szegedi</i></p>
		

Figure 3 - Multicultural fairy tales (own figure)

The purpose of the books is for children to read stories in a form of a tale that point in the direction of interaction and diversity between different cultures, drawing children's attention to the diversity of humanity, differences and their acceptance in honor of ourselves and others.

The book 'Little man's color' presents the diversity of humanity, the values inherent in differences. According to the fairy tale, Father Heaven and Mother of the Moon were concerned with the creation of humanity, but they found it boring that everyone was the same, so they created people of different colors. The tale is about the diversity of humanity, the acceptance of differences through the eyes of a child (Böszörményi, 2009). During the preparation of the session, we collect photos of children of different nationalities as well as images symbolizing the specifics of the country. We draw a big map on wrapping paper and discuss where the children would like to travel and head there first. We place pictures of the children who live there, their favorite foods, toys and the animals typical of the area. It can also be a process taking several weeks, but by the time we get to the end with populating the map, preschoolers will realize that kids are kids everywhere, they go to kindergarten, they like to play and they understand that no one should be stigmatized for their skin color.

The book 'Lili' highlights that life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Every 600th child comes into the world with Down-syndrome. The happiness of families depends on social acceptance in four ways. The book teaches you that you do not have to be afraid of those with disabilities, but you can also love these people who bring a lot of joy to those around them.

People, who are born with disabilities must be accepted and they have the same right to life. Many people imagine the world to be perfect, but it is difficult to articulate what perfect means. There is value in other people as well, but they need to be helped to use it in the society as well. A kid introduces his sister with Down-syndrome, with whom he loves good to play and live. He calls her a moon-faced, almond-eyed child and sees it as not weird, but special, but he says that unfortunately people turn away from them, making strange faces. Maybe they are afraid of her, though not only is Lili good, a little different, but she also looks wonderful and can makes the family happy (Lacor – Le Gac, 2011). The otherness of people born with disabilities needs to be interpreted to the children openly, so that they are not afraid of them, but can accept and help them naturally. It is very important that we do not isolate other people from the world, but help them to integrate into society. This process should begin early in life. The first steps need to be taken jointly by educators, children and parents.

The book *Lenka* by Katalin Szegedi is about a fat little girl, who is looking for friends but everyone is just making fun of her. 'It was in vain to make friends with the girls, but they hardly noticed' - at least that was how she explained the rejection to herself. She starts drawing wonderfully on the asphalt, which gets the kids 'attention. It turns out that she, too, can be outstandingly adept at something, if not at sports games, but she knows things that others do not (Szegedi, 2012). The book is about friendship and acceptance. For children, anything that is different from the specifics of the community can be strange. Either the appearance of the first glasses or a food allergic diet - or any difference that has visible signs - can cause problems. Nothing should be treated as a taboo subject, it should be discussed with the children; and parents can also help us with this. Cognitive programs and project weeks should be organized with the help of the children's parents, where they can learn about differences from all sides. However, it is very important that the topic is always approached according to age specifics, by choosing methods that take specifics of the group into account, answer their questions according to their age and help with understanding.

The multicultural content inherent in the tales should be processed step by step with the children, the best time being when they are not yet confronted with the topic as a problem, but only as a novelty. During the preparation of the topic, prior knowledge related to the topic should be explored. We need to approach the topic taking age-specific characteristics into account so that we do not raise fear in children. A living human world is the best for a fairy tale to present, if the tale is told by an educator. It activates the child's imagination. The third step is the processing of the topic, and talking about the issues raised. The story must be linked to

children's own worlds. We have to listen to their opinions with the help of drama method or puppetry or drawing.

5. Conclusion

Kindergartens working with multicultural moral can help acceptance in multiple ways. They do not make selection among children, do not exclude the ones bearing with special abilities and do not reject to educate children belonging to minority groups. They are sensitive for the needs of special groups, they work with child-centered educational program and there are highly-educated pedagogues. They have multicultural curriculums and they cooperate with parents. Multicultural education helps to understand the situation of the minorities, children and adults with abilities, handicapped people, poor people and talented people. Children also need to understand that not all of them can be as good, as perfect as they think. We can pass on the basic ideas of acceptance to adults through their own children, so that they do not have a preconceived view of the world. In the sessions of multicultural tales, children should be given the opportunity to experience other people's lives; experience where and how they can help their non-average peers to live a happy life. Tales also point to judging others by our own values and not having prejudices prevail in the community.

The key of multicultural education are the pedagogues and the community of school workers. But we also need to reform pedagogue education, they need multicultural knowledge and age-appropriate methodological knowledge. Kindergartens have to be more child-centered too.

„If a child lives with acceptance, learns how to find love in the world.” Brian Tracy

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