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## **Multicultural Education and Educational Process at Slovak Universities**

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### **Abstract**

Migration issues and the development of social relations to people of different cultures make multicultural education a frequently discussed topic in Slovakia these days. When it comes to culture, diversity, variety and plurality dominate because of the existence, as well as interactions, of different ethnicities, races or nations. School education focuses on drawing attention to the existence of such differences or specificities, therefore multicultural education is becoming more and more important. At higher education institutions, multicultural education is especially important in case of the students who are to become teachers themselves. Development of positive qualities and approaches, including the acceptance of cultural differences, should necessarily be a part of the pre-gradual preparation of teachers. The article presents a content analysis of student essays on the perception and understanding of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as was one of the elements of multicultural education at HEIs.

**Key words:** multicultural education, content analysis of text documents, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

### **Introduction**

Nowadays it is becoming more and more common to notice heterogeneity and cultural diversity of various groups of population within Slovakia. Regarding different ways of life that people lead, their conflicting values and different religions, it is necessary to teach children and young people to be able to accept and develop positive relationships to people who come from different cultures. It is important to carry out multicultural education not only at lower levels of education, but also within higher education institutions, especially when it comes to educating students who are to become teachers themselves (Kosová et al., 2012; Kučírková, 2016; Vavrus, 2010; O'Grady, 2012).

One of the methods of higher education as a tool for individual analysis and comparison of opinions and attitudes regarding current issues in society to the knowledge gained in class is writing essays (Hunt, & Chalmers, 2013; Sachs &

Parsell, 2014; Taylor, 2010). Within multicultural education carried out as part of the “Strategies and methods of personality development”, class students were asked to write an essay on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Human rights have always been connected with certain obligations, since they have been exercised by people of different societies in which development was determined by economic factors, traditions, understanding of an individual, and many other factors that needed to be either abolished or built up. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was mainly supposed to create conditions for a way of thinking which activates all people as fundamental members of society with the same rights and obligations, so that they may live together with society and its structure without conforming to its system and passively waiting for room to be made for them (Višňovský et al., 2014, p. 8-11). For the first time, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights gave every person a chance to acknowledge his/her own dignity and power of personality, securing equality of all people and their rights. Every article of the Declaration, even if it is concise, holds power of thought and makes room for the true understanding of reality. Enforcing human rights as stated in the Declaration meant, and still means, a great extent of responsibility towards other people, as well as understanding law, equality, and protection as empathetic phenomena. Therefore, it appears to be appropriate to use the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to teach multicultural education.

The past 69 years have shown that the Declaration has not become less important in time, its articles still staying up-to-date and compelling. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not only a political document, but also the document intended for wide population groups all over the world that should teach us how to live, not being just a source of knowledge to use for education on a wide range of matters. Several articles of the Declaration seem to present the ideal notion that lacks the ability to be enforced in everyday life. But it was the recognition and subsequent enforcement of new, progressive ideas that ensured the development of society and humanity, no matter if it appeared in the technical, ecological, social or political field. Only continuous efforts of individuals and groups managed to implement new ways and terms, if they benefited the well-being of all people. The same applies to the enforcement of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, where it is necessary to assess if the norms as idealistic notions fail to apply because people are unwilling to pass their privileges on to others, unempathetic in the understanding of the needs of other people, or because they are simply not educated enough (Danek, Siroťová & Frýdková, 2013). Education is a way how to change the reality and improve interpersonal relationships and, as the preamble to the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights states, “every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms” (Ruisel, 2010). It is necessary to bear in mind that the implementation of every idea is only successful if it is the focus of education, as well as a part of the overall formation of one's personality and learning process. Regarding this aspect, we examined the knowledge and understanding of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights among the first-year students of the University of ss. Cyril and Methodius, Faculty of Arts, in Trnava by analysing their essays.

### **Content analysis of student essays on the perception and understanding of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Methodology of the content analysis of text documents**

An adequate method of analysing student essays is a content analysis of text documents. Such analysis of student essays focused on the perception and understanding of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was carried out at the Department of Pedagogy of the University of ss. Cyril and Methodius, Faculty of Arts in Trnava. The aim was to learn how they perceive and understand the Declaration, as well as what they think about the inclusion of human rights classes in educational process. The content analysis as a research method is a procedure for an objective, systematic and quantitative description of the obvious content of communication (Švec et al., 1998; Scollon, Scollon, & Jones, 2011; Kim, 2007). Given that the counting and other forms of quantification of content units happen within their qualitative categories (terms, ideas, topics), a content analysis organically involves the qualitative side of the text as well.

The most often used quantification method is to detect the frequency of the occurrence of an analytic category in a text. Such a method seemed to be the most appropriate to use for the assessment of student essays. In the first phase, we established the analytical categories of a text content that created a system of fixedly set indicators, which we used to sort out the record units.

Most commonly, thoughts and ideas that took the form of the hyper-syntax parts of text served as the record units in our analysis of student essays. Students did not use the same words for the individual hyper-syntax parts of their essays, but their informative value and their meaning said the same. Subsequently we matched those with the analytical categories that we had previously set during the preparatory reading of the texts. The number of record units shows the consensus among students and their opinions on the perception and understanding of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

### **Characteristics of the subject sample of the text documents analysis**

Our research sample consisted of 102 students of the “Teaching of academic subjects” study programme who were in the first year of their bachelor’s studies and at the average age of 20 years old. The gender differentiation of our research sample only confirmed the observation that when it comes to students of the “Teaching of academic subjects” study programme, a prevailing feminization is obvious, given that women represented 73% of the research sample, while men represented only 27%. Such disproportion did not allow us to come to generalizing conclusions regarding the students’ opinions on pedagogical praxis based on their gender. The presented comparison is therefore only informative. Regarding their previously completed type of education, the majority of our research sample consisted of secondary grammar school graduates (70%).

### **Content analysis of text documents related to particular parts of student essays**

The text documents used for our content analysis were student essays in which we set the analytical categories of the content and matched them with individual record units.

Record units were being matched with the following analytical categories (an example of a record unit from a student essay is provided in each case):

1. I learned about the text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for the first time in the “Strategies and methods of personality development of a child” seminar.
  - “A lot of people have never read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this is the first time that I am holding it in my hands.”
  - “I have heard of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights a few times, but I have never learned about its content. I have read it for the first time in Professor Sirotova’s seminar.”
2. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights seems rather formalistic and idealistic to me.
  - “When you read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, you find yourself confused as to what it actually says, it seems like it describes this fairy tale world, that someone made up in their dreams, it seems like we are running after something, but cannot catch up with it. Now that we have all these beautiful ideas, humane notions and rights on paper, we can all sleep well at night.”

- “Adopting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was undoubtedly a huge step for humanity in the right direction. But I am worried that the Declaration is too idealistic and only formalistic.”

3. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not being abided, the rights guaranteed by it are being violated.

- “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is here to lay the conditions for following justice at least partially. Unfortunately, there have been many cases of violating different rights, either intentionally or unknowingly.”
- “For a lot of people this Declaration is a worthless piece of paper. People keep violating the fundamental human right, which is the right to life. Wars have been here since the beginning of time. Even though we manage to progress in many areas, this kind of evil remains to be one of the ways to solve political, religious and other conflicts. War is one of the best examples of how the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not being abided.”

4. Article 3, which states that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person, is considered to be the most important article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

- “I find Article 3 to be the most important of all the articles. It is indisputable that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person. Everyone who lives on this earth got his life from his parents and passes it on to his children. No one in this world, not the richest, the strongest or the smartest person is entitled to take somebody else's life.”
- “The life of each person on this earth starts with his birth and ends with his death, which we consider to be our ultimate ending. Since every man is unique and irreplaceable, it is not possible to come back once somebody's life has been taken. The right to life and life itself is the most valuable and the most important commodity that we do not often appreciate enough.”

5. Abortion is a violation of the right to life, therefore a violation of Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

- “Even the fundamental right, the right to life is repeatedly being legally violated. Since the beginning of time mothers have been giving birth to their children. Does that give them the right to take their child's life if they decide to? Nowadays every mother can make a free choice regarding the life of her unborn child. However, this right is often being exploited, and I think that it should not serve as a solution for an irresponsible behaviour of two people. It

should only be used in extraordinary cases, when the life of the mother or the child is in danger.”

- “Everyone has the right to life – even an unborn child. Why say yes to abortions? A child's life is created the moment it is conceived. I do not agree with those people who say that in the early stages, it is purely a tissue and a mother has the full right to decide what she wants to do. Does she? Does not a child have the right to life? It exists from the moment the cells amalgamate and there is a new person, who only needs time and nutrition to be able to exist on its own. Unborn children should not be deprived of their right to life. To agree with abortions is deeply unethical and a negation of one of the most important rights – the right to life.”

6. The social and economic conditions in Slovakia do not allow for individual articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to be fulfilled, most importantly Article 23, which states that everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.

- “According to Article 23 of the Declaration everyone who works has the right to fair and sufficient pay that would provide him and his family with a living adequate to human dignity. Although this requirement is proportionate, society is unfortunately unable to fully accomplish it. Wages are low, but prices get higher. Many big families do not have enough money for food and clothing, no matter how hard the parents work in their poorly-paying jobs.”

- “I think that Article 23 of the Declaration is regularly being violated in Slovakia. Job openings, wages, unemployment – those are the current problems that affect our whole society. The right to work belongs to natural human rights, however it appears that this right is slowly becoming a privilege. The reason behind that is the lack of job openings, as well as favouritism granted to relatives when filling free positions.”

7. Women are being discriminated against and their opportunities to exercise their rights under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are limited.

- “Even though we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in certain parts of the world women are considered to be inferior to men or even being abused and exploited in the worst possible way. Although the Declaration claims that both men and women are afforded equal rights, this wording seems to be insufficient. If someone was to object, I suggest they compare the number of abused women and abused men. Therefore, if we consider it in a serious and rational way, we must acknowledge the need for protecting women, who are often considered

to be “the weaker gender, unable to make a choice on their own or an accessory to the stronger gender.”

- “Women are being discriminated against even in this contemporary progressive society. It happens quite often that a woman does not get chosen for a position solely because she is a woman. It may not be open discrimination, since the Declaration itself states that both genders are equal. However, we still have not managed to overcome the prejudice that a woman can e.g. successfully work in the top management.”

8. It is necessary to include human rights classes in the educational process and start to teach students in elementary schools about the essential documents, which undoubtedly involve the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

- “It is important to teach children respect for these rules and freedoms by appropriately educating them. Because people are afforded both rights and obligations, and one of these obligations is to be a human.”
- “The worst case is when people do not know their rights and they often end up backing down to their disadvantage. Therefore, we should teach children about their rights and start with the fundamental ones provided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

### **Analysis of the results and their interpretation**

After setting the analytical categories of the content, the next step for us was to thoroughly read the student essays. After we discovered the occurrence of a record unit, we matched it with an analytical category on the record sheet.

Every text was provided with one line on the record sheet, which besides the occurrence of the record unit in a particular analytical category included the basic information about each respondent (the author of the essay), i.e. the age, gender and type of completed education.

In that way, we were able to establish the characteristics of each text and the frequency of the occurrence of record units in a particular analytical category for the whole sample of student essays. From all the texts (102):

- 52% of the respondents stated that they have learned about the text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (hereinafter “the Declaration”) for the first time while studying at university,
- 69% of the respondents consider the Declaration to be formalistic and idealistic, but do not deny its contribution to humanity,
- 98% of the respondents claimed in their essays that the Declaration is not being abided and the rights set forth in it are being violated,

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- 91% of the respondents consider Article 3 of the Declaration to be the most important, since it states that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person,

- 46% of the respondents think that abortion is a violation of Article 3 of the Declaration, although they admit that it can be necessary if the life of the mother or the child is in danger,

- 79% of the respondents showed dissatisfaction with the social and economic conditions in Slovakia, which do not allow for individual articles of the Declaration to be fulfilled, most importantly Article 23, which reads that everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment,

- 52% of the respondents stated that even nowadays women are being discriminated against and their opportunities to exercise their rights under the Declaration are limited,

- 93% of the respondents expressed the opinion that it is necessary to include human rights classes in the educational process and that such inclusion should start at the elementary school level.

Besides the ideas presented in our analysis, students mentioned in their essays reflections on euthanasia, on whether all people are really considered innocent until proven guilty, on the war in Iraq and Syria, on humanitarian help for war victims etc.

The numbers listed above were, to a significant extent, influenced by the fact that 52% of the students have learned about the text of the Declaration for the first time. Therefore, it is not surprising that they consider the Declaration to be idealistic and formalistic, that they view its articles in the light of their own subjective impressions and often find themselves pessimistic about the society in which they do not see their future. For them life is the ultimate value, superior to everything else, including the life of an unborn child. Therefore, they consider Article 3 to be the most important and abortion to be a violation of the Declaration.

On the other hand, what is positive is that students usually came to a conclusion that it is necessary to include human rights classes in the educational process at the elementary school level. They are aware of the need for such education, because an individual aware of his/her rights also respects the rights of others. They are convinced that human rights classes can prevent sociopathological behaviour of children and adolescents.

## Conclusion

The results of our analysis showed that it is still necessary to pay attention to the issue of human rights. People's knowledge of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and human rights in general is neither complete nor complex, so it can come across as a collection of ideals without a real basis. To develop a positive relationship to the protection and enforcement of human rights, it is necessary to create a system of expanding knowledge starting at the elementary school level and all the way up to the higher education level. In an environment where the rights of both children and adults are being respected and exercised, the knowledge of human rights becomes less exceptional and rather becomes a common, everyday reality in the life of every individual. Our environment is a strong influence on developing relationships to different parts of the reality, and if a certain document is perceived as a natural part of the society's life, its value is not only motivational, but also practical. For that reason, the educational environment of every school or university should include multicultural education. Everyone evaluates the importance of protecting and exercising human rights from his/her own perspective that is affected by his/her knowledge, experience and actual performance. It is apparent that it is not enough to have knowledge of a certain issue, but one has to be able to analyse certain documents in the light of particular relations and circumstances, which applies to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well. Being aware of the content of important documents and safeguarding them is significant not only for knowing our own rights, but also for accepting the rights of others coming from different cultures.

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