

REACHING THE SOCIAL COHESION IN EDUCATION: PERSPECTIVE OF LITHUANIAN TEACHERS

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Abstract

The role of the teacher in the educational process has to be reconsidered within the process of social change. Social cohesion can be viewed as an integral part of sustainable development, based on an integrated, holistic approach to economic, societal and environmental development. The role of teachers needs to be reoriented toward the promotion of social cohesion in education, considering the different subcultures that are present. The empirical study described in this article was carried out in Lithuania as a stage within the VI Framework Project “Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education”. A semi-structured interview designed by an international team was conducted with eight primary school teachers from a Kaunas region basic school. The data obtained through the interviews was subjected for content analysis. The paper concludes that the interviewed primary school teachers tend to act as representatives that enhance the subculture of sustainability.

Key words: teacher; social cohesion; subcultures; cooperation; sustainability.

Globalisation is multifaceted phenomenon which is characterised by many controversies. Present reality can be described by the concept of “social arrhythmia”: the disintegration of daily life, work and career rhythms. Unfortunately, workforce flexibility often determines an accelerated payoff on capital as well as its unrestricted traffic, and has had a detrimental effect on working conditions (Castells, 1996). Although the utilisation of knowledge and skills has intensified, a greater level of autonomy has not as of yet been attained (Zuzevičiūtė & Teresevičienė, 2008). A need for practices that promote social cohesion remains to be addressed, and here the role of teacher can not be underestimated. Therefore, the question that has to be explored is how teachers perceive the changes of educational practice towards fostering social cohesion in education. This study presents some theoretical background and reflection on empirical findings of teachers’ perceptions of educational situations regarding social cohesion in the context of sustainable development.

It seems that our society is living better than at any other moment in history (Castells, 2007); our prosperity is based on technologies that free many from physical work. However, a relatively easier life is very often an illusion. Even wealthy societies have

many people who work hard, though the nature of their work is different, to create a new design, a new car, or write a book, for example. Although, in the case of failing to design a new car or write a book, neither the designer nor the writer are condemned to starvation, as was the case earlier in history, where if you did not sow grain, famine was a real probability. According to Castells (2007), the increasing amount of society's wealth has nothing to do with society becoming wealthier. In many countries, even those whom we consider to be the cradles of equality and equal possibilities, some people become incredibly rich while others either become somewhat richer or their economic situation remains the same, leading to a growing gap in society. The same principle applies for sustainability because, quite often, wealth is primarily based on using natural resources without consideration of the long term consequences (Jämsä, 2006; Government of the Republic of Lithuania, 2003). From the point of view of economic prosperity, the societies of the 21st century have progressed less than we might want to believe.

Types of subcultures: looking for the connections with sustainability

Martin and Siehl (1983) have identified at least three types of subcultures, namely Counterculture, Orthogonal subculture and Enhancing subculture.

People, who believe, manifest, and practice values that contradict prevailing culture comprise countersubcultures. There are many of these (Kiškina, 2008; Kiškina, Kavolis, Buivydas, Pranckevičiūtė, & Šalūnienė, 2008). Skinheads, Bikers, Punks, Goths, and many other groups consisting predominantly of young people, but sometimes of people of all ages might be considered as such. These groups demonstrate behaviors and appear to have beliefs which the general dominant culture considers delinquent at best and illegal in some cases. Probably the guru's example, who teaches his believers that violence is the way to prove one's point might be latter case. Considering globalisation, the teacher's changing role, and the culture of educational practices as it's focus, it is difficult to provide an example of such a counterculture. With sustainability in mind, the example of such countercultures might be the radical environmentalists, who dissent against atomic power plants, or power plants of any kind for that matter. The early representatives of such countercultures were workers in Great Britain in the 17th century, who damaged and even ruined textile machines. Today, from a historical perspective, we do understand the latter: one machine now does the same work that 6 machines or 12 workers did earlier. That means 5 (or 11) other people were left unemployed and therefore at danger (the age of industrialisation was the age of great loss in life) to die of hunger (Losee, 1993). However, we do not understand, or at least do not support the fighters against nuclear power. Not knowing how to otherwise provide alternative energy for 6 billion people, we feel the protests are futile, unproductive, or both.

Orthogonal subcultures include people who do not contradict the dominant culture, rather, they emphasise specific aspects or certain values that the culture embraces anyway. In case of sustainability, the example of activity of moderate environmentalists could be included in this concept. It does not contradict to a dominant culture to stand for alternative sources of energy, like wind. On the contrary, it is considered a responsible activity, good for the public and even fashionable to encourage states and private organisations to use wind power. However, these people are not fully aware that "ecological" source sometimes can cause substantial damage to nature (Laumer, 2006). If ecologically orientated people encounter this kind of information, they, most probably,

will reconsider some of the slogans, and will search for more information one way or another.

At last, the representatives of the Enhancing subculture act as proponents and sometimes even prophets of the values and believes that are generally accepted by the dominant culture anyway. They do not contradict, but rather foster and promote the values and behaviors that manifest certain values. In education towards the social cohesion and sustainability, many teachers trigger and promote discussions about natural resources in order to foster responsible consumerism, equality of distribution, care for each other and responsibility.

With this analysis at hand, we may provide the midterim conclusion that teachers' changing roles related to social cohesion could be connected to changes in culture. It is not still clear whether the depth of these changes is sufficient to support education for sustainable development and social cohesion at a needed level, and how these changes are operationalised in everyday educational practices.

Methodology

The empirical study was designed and implemented as one of the stages of a longitudinal study for the project *Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education* (Integrated project, VI Framework Programme), coordinated by Barcelona University and carried out by a team of researchers at the Department of Education of Vytautas Magnus University in Lithuania during winter and spring of 2008. The semi-structured interview was designed by an international team, lead by the coordinators at Barcelona University and Malta University, in order to identify the teachers' perceptions of educational activities with a goal to highlight those activities that foster social cohesion as one of the dimensions of education for sustainable development. The interview contained 12 questions such as "What do you do to include students and their families to building up the community in every way possible (the community that takes care of environment, people who can not take care of themselves, etc.)?"

In line with the project proposal, eight primary school teachers (teachers for grades 1-4) from one of Kaunas region basic schools were interviewed. The region and the school were selected as they adhered to the main indicators specified in the study requirements: the school is situated in the community with a wide scope of families with different socio-economic status, from well situated families to those living below the official threshold of poverty. The community includes minority families and several disabled students. The most important thing determining the choice of this school was the higher achievements of pupils compared with the similar schools in other places.

All respondents were women with the age range from 30 to 48 years; their work experience varied from 5 to 23 years. All of them have a higher education, some of them acquired a higher education after several years of professional experience. Data collection was performed with an adherence to main ethical requirements of the methodology of social research and in collaboration with the colleagues in Malta and Spain, especially in the field of research tools. The research was organized in one of the school's classrooms in the spring of 2008. Time and place ensured the possibility for open conversation. Each participant of the study was provided with a written description of the study and if they agreed to participate in a study, they were asked to sign a consent form. All respondents had positive attitude toward the interview process. All interviews were audio-

recorded. For the interpretation of data received through the semi-structured interviews, the method of content analysis was used. First of all, the authors of the study were interested in the detecting the type of subculture represented in the answers of teachers. Then, among others, the following themes were searched for in the textual units of answers: role of the teacher in cooperation with the community, partnership with parents to foster social inclusion, and educational involvement of children from different backgrounds.

Perspective of interviewed teachers: ways to reach social cohesion

Despite acknowledgement of its significance in the last two decades of the 20th century, the concept of sustainable development proved to be difficult to apply in many cases. According to Bonnett, we should conceive sustainability not as a policy but as a frame of mind. It is important to ask: what constitutes a right relationship with nature? And this question relates both to the basic concept of sustainable development, and motives to implement education towards it, and also it is related to an understanding of ideas about human identity, which are implicit in any proper understanding of sustainable development (Bonnett, 2002). Sustainable development means that the needs of the present generation should be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The main goal of sustainable development is to achieve a satisfactory quality of life now and for coming generations.

One of the dimensions of quality of life is rewarding education in a fostering community; that is the way to operationalise changes in daily educational practice. The analysis of studies in the field of social cohesion and sustainability both in Lithuania and globally reveals that social cohesion still faces a number of challenges, as a number of new forms of social exclusion become evident in Lithuanian society (Jonikova, 2000; Gudynas, 2003). This occurs because Lithuania is joining a market orientated economy, and the global society characterized by heterogeneity that has created some challenges that were not very evident previously, has become very influential in recent years.

As it was mentioned earlier, the representatives of the Enhancing subculture act as the proponents and sometimes even prophets of the values and beliefs that are generally accepted by the dominant culture anyway. Social cohesion and sustainability seem to be accepted values for the dominant democratic culture. However, it is not still completely clear to what extent these values are supported by practice, in our case – participation in school activities and educational practices in general.

Extensive research in the field remains one of the crucial activities to highlight the possible ways for rendering education more sustainability orientated, empowering and enabling more active social participation later in the student's life as an adult. Contemporary reality advances a lot of tasks and creates many problems for schools, families and teachers. These problems can be solved only by common efforts. So, cooperation with the community becomes a very important factor to stress in a teachers' role. This is the first theme discerned from the interviews. As one of the respondents stated:

School cooperates with community, certain representatives, and organizations within the community a lot... this would be with the library, with a forestry society, and forestry administration authority in our region... we have many events together [...]. We are really community orientated... Friendly, and we feel well within our space... actually, people come to see how we work, how we live, what a beautiful school we have, and what we do here. So yes,

we cooperate well within a school, in the immediate community, and way beyond (Teacher, 11 years of experience).

The next theme prevailing in the answers is the teachers' partnership with parents to foster social inclusion. Teachers welcome any parents' participation in school activities. The data of educational research show that children achieve better learning results in schools where parents are involved in educational process and the behavior of children becomes more socially acceptable (Comer & Haynes, 1992; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991, etc.). It is a challenge to attract families belonging to minorities or problem families to school:

The children who are at risk of social exclusion come mostly from low income families which are often the result of dysfunctional social and economic behaviors, like drinking.... and the parents from such families do not always actively participate in school activities... you know, sometimes children themselves are quite cruel... and yes, you might say sometimes marginalization happens... (Teacher, 13 years of experience).

The same teacher also emphasizes the role of parents' education for their involvement in school activities. A higher level of education directly correlates with higher involvement:

And the ones (parents) who have secondary or basic (9 years of schooling) education, they know everything, they do not need anything, they do not come.... the parents' education is very important. Those who have a higher education are more inclined to participate. The more they know, the more often they say that some things are unclear and want to know more (Teacher, 13 years of experience).

Though, the teachers also mentioned some examples of very successful cooperation:

I fully agree with the inclusion of parents into teaching. I think that parents could even attend a class. For example, when I was expecting a child, one of the mothers of my pupils was a MD – obstetrician. So I invited her to tell children, how children are born, how things work, and the children were absolutely excited. Of course, there is always a question of ethics – what should be said and when. But in that case everything went so well together – me – pregnant, and that explanation, and mother was very sensitive.... so later, when I had another class, I invited her again (Teacher, 18 years of experience).

The third important aspect of educational activities toward social cohesion is related to educational involvement of children from different backgrounds. During the interviews the teachers emphasized that we are living in multicultural society, the world is very much internationalized, so one of the goals of education becomes the support for each child in a way that makes him/her feel secure and motivated:

And all children, of any religion, nationality, or a child with special learning needs – well, they are all included in extra curricular activities, events that are organized beyond the school all the time. Sports, also ecology, whatever is of interest to them. Curriculum is changed according to needs of every child, and this is done by each teacher... and this is a job for a jeweler... everything has to be done in a sensitive way (Teacher, 13 years of experience).

The participants of the study also mentioned the need for the teachers' skillful empathetic interaction with children of different background:

We do modify curriculum for a child with special needs, but if the special needs – learning difficulties come from a family that is at risk of social marginalization, if a child is neglected at home? Therefore, the support should be gentle and almost invisible sometimes... I had two girls in my class, one of them did not have mother, and the other one did not have father... I included them in absolutely everything we did in class, in performance, everywhere. I kept telling them: girls, everything will be fine, you'll be princesses... (Teacher, 13 years of experience).

The quotes from the teachers' answers as well as other interview data show that the school involved in this study (Kaunas region) is inclined to implement a number of educational practices towards social cohesion and sustainability. Though, the study seems to indicate clearly that even if teachers embrace the new role and foster active participation in community and mutual support, often other agents, e.g. parents, still have to be encouraged to participate.

Conclusions

In the 21st century, living in a postmodern community that experiences rapid social, economical, political and cultural changes, the role of the teacher in the educational process becomes even more important. Teachers today are expected to foster the development of self-determined persons. Teachers should aim toward educating individuals able to act and live in a changing political and economical situation, as well as to participate in creating a democratic society, where social cohesion and sustainability are the main objectives.

Nowadays teachers, as socially active agents, should promote the cooperation among different community groups. The focus should be on the interaction between families and school, and on the communication and cooperation among teachers, pupils, and parents. Parent involvement in school life can be one of the means for creating a cooperative and cohesive society.

The deeper analysis of the project activities revealed that interviewed primary school teachers in the Kaunas region of Lithuania tend to act as representatives of the Enhancing subculture. It is evident that quite often they perform the role of active proponents of sustainability and social cohesion.

This study, completed as one of the activities of the project *Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education*, indicates that even if teachers have embraced the new role and foster active participation in community activities and mutual support of all engaged stakeholders, it is still necessary to invest in encouraging other agents to participate in a child's education to a greater extent.

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