VALUES ACROSS COUNTRIES IN A MODERN SOCIETY – THE EXAMPLE OF POLISH SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This paper reports on a fragment of a broader research on values education in Polish and Latvian schools. This paper seeks to evaluate data from the European Social Survey (ESS) and elaborate on the frames of references for identification of the aims for future research. The paper highlights the findings of an action research carried out in two Polish schools. The values of European countries are analysed in the context of educational research in Europe and other regions of the world. The frames of references constructed during the study and data from European Social Survey were the grounds for creating a questionnaire for an action research to find out the tendencies that derive from the experience of students. The survey was preceded by a special training session for the teaching staff about evaluation and its significance for increasing the quality of school performance.

Key words: values, values education, system of values, quality of school work, sustainability

Introduction

This study is a fragment of a broader research on values education in Polish and Latvian schools in the context of education for sustainable development. Values education is of utter importance in Poland due to many reasons. Firstly, official governmental programmes, in this respect, do not exist in Poland although such programmes are required. Secondly, talking about values is often associated with Catholic values or values related to the Catholic Church. This view is inadequate in the contemporary world.

Values orient people's behaviour in social situations (Matusiewicz, 1975). Thus, a value gets its sense and meaning only if it is an element of a certain system, and it plays a specified role in this system (Matusiewicz, 1975). Each society that wishes to develop must remember and cherish the values which are an inseparable element of the society's culture. Values are not the result of social relations; values are created as a result of social relations (Parson, 1969).

Values have been the subject of research and studies of many theorists from different parts of the world for ages. The notion of value has multiple aspects and meanings; it can be defined in many different ways. Values could be presented from psychological, sociological and cultural perspectives. This paper discusses values connected with school, and those aspects of values seem to be the most significant ones, particularly if they are intended to be discussed in a holistic manner.

The precursor of this notion was Plato (Tatarkiewicz, 1988) who recognized justice as the most important value in life ("virtue" by Plato); however, justice was understood at the time in a completely different way than it is today. The state and the interests of the state were of the greatest importance to Plato. Even a lie in the interest of the state was justified. The base of the statehood was upbringing and gradual proceeding to further stages of initiation.

The notion of values has evolved over the ages, and, at present, we can distinguish the following definitions (Matuszewicz, 1975). Value can be understood as a union of ideas and attitudes which create a scale of preferences and priorities, both for motives or objectives and actions (Young, 1949). Value is highlighted as the primary choice or positive attitude to certain target relationships (such as equality, salvation, self-esteem or freedom) or certain widely understood ways of conduct (such as courage, honesty, friendship or moral purity) (Bem, 1970). According to Bem (1970), values are objectives, not means. Thus, they can be described as a certain process which is important both from the point of view of an individual and the society. Values can be considered to be the main components of attitudes which govern our behaviour aiming at certain preferable objectives (Hollander, 1971). Maslow (1959), in contrast, perceives values as constructive differences between individuals that create preferences related to the way we treat each other, the culture and the world.

Social value is understood as any object which possesses empirical contents, is available to the members of a social group and has a meaning as a result of which it is or may be an object of activity (Thomas, & Znaniecki, 1996). Value is defined as a conception of the desirable, characteristic of the individual or the group and exerting influence on the choice of available ways, means and goals of action (Kluckhohn, 1962). Krech and Cruchfield (1962) argues that value is a particularly significant kind of belief shared by the members of society and is related to what is desirable, good or what should be. Drobnickij (1966) acknowledges that value is an object of unfulfilled need, something that should be acquired.

The context and the purpose of the study

The study is a fragment of a broader action research. The author conducted the study in two schools in the Wielkopolskie Province in Poland.

One of previous essential elements of the study was the analysis of values carried out by the author on the basis of empirical data from ESS – the European Social Survey Round 4, a survey which is carried out in many European countries.

The system of social values in each country results from the historical experience of that country. The system of social values is shaped in the process of society development and during the development of an individual. Poland, traditionally regarded as a conservative country, is placed mostly in the middle of the group. The declarative level and the real life level are very different. Trying to develop the school life, it is necessary to take into consideration the real school environment rather than declarations (Świtała, 2010).

The main objective of the study is to determine teachers' awareness of the notion of value. The study also seeks to find out an answer to the question: *Are we ready to foster values in Polish schools?*

Methods

This study was conducted by the author in two schools. One of the schools (school No.1) is a big complex of schools located in a small town. It consists of a vocational school, a secondary technical school and a general secondary school. 43 teachers of different specialisations, with different periods of work experience and of different ages took part in the study. The other school (school No. 2) is a general secondary school – a non-public school with public school accreditation, located in a big town. Twenty-three teachers of general subjects, of different ages and with different periods of work experience participated in the study.

The overall analyses were carried out for a group. The length of work experience, age and the subject taught were not taken into consideration in this study, and the analyses were carried out irrespective of these factors. This study was preceded by workshops for the teachers, the subject of which was to work out the strategy and plan for school development, taking into account the systems of values which prevail in the schools.

The basic empirical data comes from the analysis of answers given to the open questions included in the questionnaire. In this part of the questionnaire, four questions were related to the understanding of the notion of value (the respondent could define a value as he/she understands it), choosing the values considered to be important (each respondent could indicate five different values), choosing the value considered by the respondent to be the most important one and specifying the methods of work used by the teachers to encourage values within the subjects they teach. The results of the qualitative research were analyzed by the author with the use of the Excel program for tabular presentations.

Findings

The first question to the respondents was an open question: *How do you understand the notion of a value?* The respondents gave the following answers which have been grouped and put into the categories which are provided below.

Principles. 16 respondents in school No. 1 and eight respondents in school No. 2 defined values as

- norms that function in social life;
- specific standards of behaviour;
- a very important norm;
- a norm which shows what actions need to be taken;
- a set of all assumed norms which help us make decisions;
- certain principles which are very important in an individual's life.

Individual characteristics. Eight respondents in school No. 1 and three respondents in school No.2 defined values as

- characteristics that show ‘the value of a person’;
- characteristics that enrich a person;
- characteristics that allow a person to be a good Polish citizen and a good employee;
- a set of behaviour patterns and personality traits;
- a set of characteristics specific for an individual or a group;
- characteristics which are helpful while making a decision;
- a characteristic, a virtue, which should govern a person’s behaviour.

Aspirations. Seven respondents in school No. 1 and two respondents in school No.2 defined values as

- the most important goals and aspirations in a person’s life;
- high ideals in the life of each person;
- essential goals and plans in life;
- the aim of a person’s activity;
- kindness, wisdom, an aim in life.

Material goods. Two respondents in both of the schools defined values as

- something material a person aims at and wishes to possess;
- something of a specific meaning;
- important things.

Attitudes. A few respondents defined values as

- attitudes which are considered to be valuable and desired;
- patterns of behaviour passed on from one generation to another.

The fact that 13 respondents (12 from school No. 1 and one from school No. 2) did not provide any answers at all is quite alarming. Both in school No. 1 and in school No. 2, the dominant answer was that values are norms (principles). Occasionally, values were defined as specific attitudes.

Furthermore, the respondents were asked to indicate the five values which, in their opinion, are the most important values in social life. On the basis of the answers given by the respondents, the list which comprises 59 items has been worked out (Table 1). The list was categorized by the author and the participants together.

Table 1. The most important values in social life

Norms	Individual characteristics	Attitudes	Aspirations	Goods – material and non-material
security	keeping one’s word	kindness	effectiveness	dignity

Sequel to Table 1 see on p. 59.

Sequel to Table 1.

ethical behaviour	loyalty	accuracy	carer	wisdom
honour	responsibility	friendliness	love	money
humanitarianism	courage	independence	friendship	family
law-abidingness	organisational skills	objectivity	job satisfaction	tradition
justice	diligence	patriotism	stability	faith
tolerance	dedication	helping others	recognition	health
freedom	truthfulness	respect for others	credibility	life
	righteousness	respect for culture		
	decency	ability to live in a society		
	punctuality	faithfulness		
	religiousness	social sensitivity		
	reliability	understanding the other person		
	conscientiousness			
	frankness			
	honesty			
	compassion			
	understanding			
	perseverance			
	trust			
	obligation			
	kindliness			

The results for each school and a comprehensive list of the results – ten items for each school are provided in Figure 2. In both cases, the dominant answer was honesty and friendship. In school No. 1, there was no answer in four cases, whereas in school No. 2 all the respondents gave answers to this question.

The respondents were also asked to indicate the most important value, according to their opinion. According to the opinion of the respondents, honesty and family were recognized as the definitely most important values in both schools.

The fourth question was an open question: *How do you foster values within your subject?* In school No. 1, the ways of fostering values within the subjects taught by the respondents include showing one's own example (n=5); showing standards of behaviour/role models (n=5); application of clear requirements (n=3); organization of work (=2); drawing attention to national values (n=2); showing trust towards students (n=1); showing the role of tolerance (n=1); admission of own errors or mistakes (n=1); discussions of values with students (n=1); prohibition of cheating (n=1); praising the ability to admit being wrong (n=1); teaching understanding for others (n=1); creating the right atmosphere (n=1); diligent performance of undertaken tasks (n=1); lack of criticism (n=1); allowing students to have their own opinions (n=1).

Figure 2. The most important values in social life, as articulated by the respondents in school No. 1 and school No. 2.

The most common ways of fostering values within the subjects taught by the respondents are provided in Table 2. Three respondents gave no answers, which constitutes 14.3%. The most common ways of fostering values within the subjects taught by the teachers in school No. 1 are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Ways of fostering values within the subjects taught by the respondents in school No. 1

showing own example	5
showing standards of behaviour/role models	5
application of clear requirements	3
organisation of work	2
drawing attention to national values	2
showing trust towards students	1
showing the role of tolerance	1
admission of own errors or mistakes	1
discussions of values with students	1
prohibition of cheating	1
praising the ability to admit being wrong	1
teaching understanding for others	1
creating the right atmosphere	1
diligent performance of undertaken tasks	1
lack of criticism	1
allowing students to have their own opinions	1

In school No. 2, the most common ways of fostering values within the subjects include prohibition of cheating (n=7); showing standards of behaviour/role models (n=6); showing the role of tolerance (n=5); rebuking for wrong behaviour (n=4); fair marking (n=3); showing no favouritism to any students (n=3); teaching honesty (n=3); drawing attention to risk or threat (n=2); teaching teamwork (n=2); discussions of values with students (n=1);

application of clear requirements (n=1); lack of criticism (n=1); teaching responsibility for another person (n=1); teaching how do have a discussion (n=1); teaching self-acceptance (n=1). The most common ways of fostering values within the subjects taught by the respondents in school No. 2 are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Ways of fostering values within the subjects taught by the respondents in school No. 2

showing own example	10
prohibition of cheating	7
showing standards of behaviour/role models	6
showing the role of tolerance	5
rebuking for wrong behaviour	4
fair marking	3
showing no favouritism to any students	3
teaching honesty	3
drawing attention to risk or threat	2
teaching teamwork	2
discussions of values with students	1
application of clear requirements	1
lack of criticism	1
teaching responsibility for another person	1
teaching how do have a discussion	1
teaching self-acceptance	1

17 respondents gave no answers, which constitutes 39,5 %. Other common ways include showing patterns or role-models to follow and making students work on their own, with a ban on cheating at the same time (cheating is a serious problem in Polish schools).

Discussion and conclusion

The research results show minute differences between the answers provided in the two schools, despite the fact the schools are located in the completely different environments. The most common answers given by the respondents are alike. It probably results from the fact that certain values are generally accepted and recognized as essential social values as a consequence of the historical experience of the Polish society. It may result from the fact that both schools are governed in a similar way.

The obtained results show how the notion of value is comprehended. The respondents most often understood values as principles/norms that regulate social life, indicate what is right and desirable. The respondents also referred to values as individual traits, which are essential for the development of an individual and society, and the most modest aims and aspirations of a human being.

Some respondents found it difficult to give an answer to the question: *How do you understand the notion of a value* (27.9% and 5.5% in the surveyed schools respectively), particularly in the case of school No. 1. It means that one third of the teachers in this school do not highlight spiritual, intellectual or non-material aspects of social life. It may also be the evidence of a very low level of interest and participation in social life. It is also

probable that this part of society (here teachers) is not interested in their own influence on the social life and the surrounding environment. This tendency is extremely alarming and, unfortunately, characteristic of the contemporary Polish society.

Honesty was indicated, in both of the schools, as the most important value from the point of view of social development, which seems to be absolutely justified taking into account the current social situation in Poland. Honesty is thought to be an indispensable requirement for further social development. Honesty guarantees trust in the ruling élite, entrusts them with the mandate to introduce necessary changes. It is also a guarantee of social development in all essential areas where the interests of all the participants of the social life are taken into account, both on a macro and micro scale.

The low percentage of the teachers (39.5% and 14.3% in school No.1 and school No.2 respectively) who were unable to indicate how, if at all, they foster values within their subjects needs to be analysed carefully.

The respondents indicated their own example as the most important way of fostering values within the subjects they teach. Such an attitude is justified by the traditions of Polish pedagogy. As a matter of fact, values are handed down from generation to generation, also within the teacher–student and student–teacher relationships.

It is necessary to initiate discussions of the ways of fostering values within subject groups. It requires, however, proper actions to be taken not only on the level of a particular school, but also on a national level, which depends on the good will of those who are in charge of the entire system of education. Discussions at school seem to be much easier to organize because it “only” requires the commitment of the teachers who work in the school. In the schools where the survey was carried out, it seems to be particularly easy because the teachers have already made the first step towards changes in their school, by undertaking the tasks aiming at developing and adopting the plan of their own school development.

The system of Polish education needs to be modified initiating realistic reforms. Student-oriented rather than content-oriented curricula should be adopted. Polish schools need well-prepared teachers. Such a system should take into account the requirements of the sustainable development of society, and teachers should be made particularly aware and responsible in this respect.

Further research will be based on dominant values in the context of education for sustainable development. Values education should highlight not only moral aspects, but also social, emotional, psychological, spiritual and intellectual aspects of personality development. In further stages of work, it is also necessary to specify the meaning of the notion of value.

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