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THE ATTITUDES OF THE BULGARIAN TEACHERS TO THE LITERACY OF THE STUDENTS IN THE MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM

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Abstract:-

This article presents the results of a study among 255 teachers from all educational levels in Bulgaria. The literacy is defined as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon. The results of the frequency and dispersion test reveal contradictions in the assessments of the teachers.

Keywords:-*Multiculturalism, literacy, education, ethnicity*

INTRODUCTION

The multicultural education became an important topic for the researchers in Bulgaria. Sociologists, economists, psychologists and teachers alike conduct various studies for various purposes. This article presents some of the data from a wider international study conducted within COST Action IS 1401 “Strengthening Europeans’ Capabilities by Establishing the European Literacy Network” led by Professor Rui Alves of the University of Porto, Portugal.

The situation of the Romani (Gipsy) minority in Bulgaria is not significantly different from that in other Eastern European countries. According to Todorov (2012, pp. 184-185.), during the last two decades two major circumstances have had a negative impact on the Romani education and on other spheres of life such as health care, employment, housing: the collapse of the planned economies in the 90s and the economic crisis at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century. The change in the employment of the Romani population led to increased marginalization. Its social security was also reduced, while the relative share of this population increased, compared to other ethnic communities in Bulgaria.

In another study by the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in 2016, Zahova points out that Bulgaria is one of the few countries in the European Union where the number of girls leaving the education system is greater than that of the boys. According to the author “23.2% of the Romani in this age group (7-15) do not study, while in the Romani communities with a peripheral Turkish identity this share is 11.9%; for the Bulgarian ethnic group - 5.6%” (Zahova, 2016, p. 13). Similarly to Todorov, as a reason for this situation Zahova highlights the poverty and the unemployment of parents, the negative attitudes towards the Romani in the Bulgarian society reflected in the treatment of the Romani children in the Bulgarian schools, the labour migration of parents and their poor education, the violations of the right to education.

The findings of these Bulgarian researchers naturally imply studying of those teachers who are the leading subject in the process of school education. It is them who are expected to change the existing social climate and to accelerate the positive changes in the integration of the minority groups. In order to assess the direction of the necessary changes, it must be clear how the “literacy” category is understood within the context of the multicultural education.

Meacham (2000-2001) uses the „crossroad” metaphor to explain the peculiarities of the literacy within the multicultural context. The studies and the measurements of the effectiveness of the education generate political sensitivity to the understanding of the literacy related to the cultural differences among the students. He cites authors who have found that “culturally singular conceptions of literacy and practices based on such concepts have played a fundamental role in the inscription of national identity” (Meacham, 2000-2001, p. 182). This precisely gives rise to the danger of dominance of one cultural tradition over others, created by smaller ethnic communities, despite their historical representativeness. Hence, there is political responsibility to build tolerance to cultural diversity during the learning process. The first step in this process is undoubtedly the breaking of prejudices towards the separate ethnicities. The studies of international teams such as ours are an important prerequisite for establishing the facts, i.e., what the specific attitudes of the teachers towards the literacy of the minorities are.

The adoption of the ideas of multiculturalism overturns the traditional „Western” notions about the cultural identity. It brings to the fore the value of each culture, regardless of the ethnicity, while at the same time tries to maintain a balance between the interests of the groups that have to communicate with each other. In the field of education, for example, the question is discussed of how to evaluate the performance of the minority students in the national tests, where the demands are relatively high for all students. There is also the question of what the global economy needs - competence and readiness for different kinds of labour or cognitive achievements.

In the context of these disputes, the boundaries of the literacy are outlined during the process of multicultural learning. As Meacham notes, the literacy should not outline the power of the particular ethnicity but should reflect the educational, cultural and social results that the society wants and needs. It is necessary to take into account not only the students’ knowledge but also the social barriers they have to overcome in order to prove themselves in the field of education. This is what gives Meacham the right to conclude: “Literacy, whether thought of as decoding, interpreting, composing, or discussing text, is a point at which multiple personal, cultural, linguistic and discursive influences come together” (Meacham, 2000-2001, p. 190).

The definition confirms the metaphor about the literacy in the multicultural education learning as „crossroad”. It intertwines the purely linguistic skills with the student’s cultural and personal features. Here lies the difficulty for the teacher who has to teach in a multicultural classroom. He should first „feel” the opposition and the tension between the students in the class and then develop „strategies” to overcome them. In this case the combination of language and culture is a prerequisite for a gradual change of the identity of the students – a process that is certainly long and contradictory. It is related to the socially oriented actions of the teacher, through which the most important cognitive skills are learned, taking into account the „starting level” of each student. Hence the importance of the multiculturalism to the education – it implies diagnosing and assessment of the individual progress of each student and reconstruction of the traditional teaching models.

Method

Participants

The study was carried out among 255 teachers from all stages of education in Bulgaria: preschool, primary, lower and upper secondary. The geographic areas where the participants teach are: North-East, North-West and South-East Bulgaria and in the schools where the study was carried out, the concentration of students from the Romani ethnic group is higher. Depending on the professional experience, the total number of teachers participating in the study is distributed as follows: up to five years – 12.1% (31); from six to ten years – 9.4% (24); from eleven to fifteen years – 10.2% (26); more than fifteen years – 68.1% (174). The relative share of students with mother tongue different than Bulgarian is distributed as

follows: in 30.3% of the classes they are from 0 to 10%; in 2.8% of the classes – from 11 to 30%; in 3.2% – from 31 to 50%; in 11.2% – from 51 to 70%; in 52.2% – from 71 to 100%. Four respondents did not answer this question.

Measurements

The questionnaire contains a specially developed scale for identifying the teachers' attitude to the literacy in the multicultural classroom. It includes six statements that have to be ranked from 1 to 6: 1 – Strongly disagree ; 2 - Disagree ; 3 – Somewhat disagree ; 4 – Somewhat agree ; 5 - Agree ; 6 – Strongly agree . The tool is developed by Charles Mifsud, Julie Dockrell and Rositsa Petrova. The first statement concerns the relationship between the knowledge of more than two languages and the knowledge in specific school subjects. The second statement concerns the relationship between the knowledge of several languages and the development of cognitive skills. The third and fourth statements require the teachers to assess how the knowledge of several languages influences the learning of reading and writing. The fifth statement is related to the influence of the reading and writing skills in the native language on the learning of other languages. The sixth statement examines the teachers' opinion as to whether it would be better that the students learned literacy first in their native language and then in the language of the school education. The description of the items makes it clear that the literacy is understood as a combination of socially and culturally determined skills. The multilingualism is seen primarily as an advantage and a factor for expanding the cognitive abilities of the students. The calculations are made with the software 'SPSS for Windows'.

Results

Table 1 presents the relative frequencies of the responses.

Table 1: Frequency distribution of the responses of the participating teachers (total 255) for scale „Literacy”

Items	Frequency in % 1	Frequency in % 2	Frequency in % 3	Frequency in % 4	Frequency in % 5	Frequency in % 6
High levels of literacy in more than two languages results in higher development of school subject knowledge	8,6	7,8	14,5	20,4	29,8	18,8
High levels of literacy in more than two languages results in higher development of cognitive skills	8,6	5,5	11,8	24,3	28,6	21,2
Literacy development in a child's L1 can facilitate the development of reading in the target language	13,7	9,4	18,4	25,1	20	13,3
Literacy development in a child's L1 can facilitate the development of writing in the target language	12,9	12,2	16,9	25,9	20,4	11,8
Children who can read and write in their first language will learn other languages faster than those who cannot read and write in their first language	11	11,8	16,5	22,4	21,2	17,3
Children who are not proficient in the language/s of schooling would do better in school if they learn to read and write first in their first language	27,5	16,5	19,6	19,6	10,6	6,3

Cronbach's Alpha for the “Literacy” scale is quite high – .8946 (for totally 255 participants). The reliability of the scale allows analysis of the frequency distribution data. For the first statement, “High levels of literacy in more than two languages results in higher development of school subject knowledge” the relative frequencies are: 8.6% strongly disagree; 7.8% disagree; 14.5% somewhat disagree; 20.4% somewhat agree; 29.8% agree and 18.8% strongly agree. The chart of this distribution is as follows:

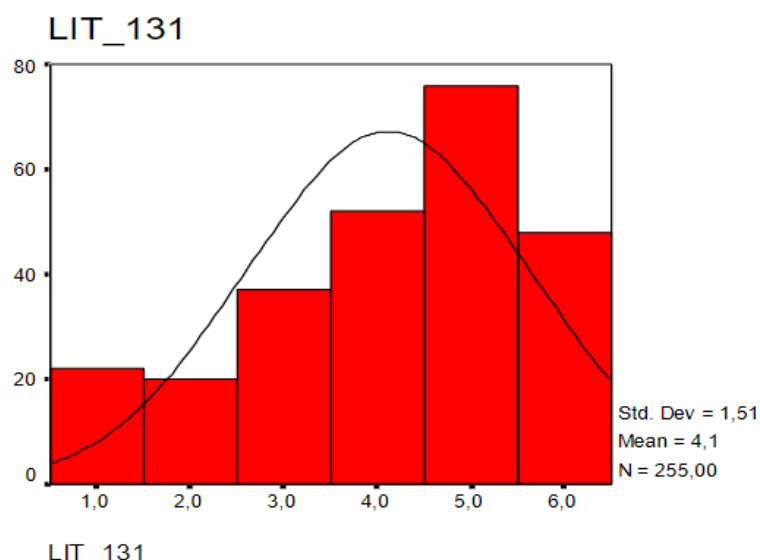


Fig. 1 High levels of literacy in more than two languages results in higher Development of school subject knowledge

The chart shows that the distribution of the responses is normal and the average value is 4.12. Generally, the attitudes of the teachers tend towards a positive attitude towards the constructive influence of the multilingualism on the students' knowledge of the school subjects.

The influence of the literacy in more than two languages on the cognitive skills is positively assessed by most teachers: 28.6% agree; 21.2% strongly agree and 24.3% somewhat agree. The average of the given answers is 4.22. About the influence of the first language on the learning of reading and writing, the teachers is quite divided in their opinions. The highest share is of the undecided teachers: 25.1% for reading and 25.9% for writing somewhat agree. Almost equal is the share of teachers who strongly disagree and strongly agree: 13.7% and 13.3% for reading and 12.9% and 11.8% for writing. 20% of the teachers agree that the multilingualism influences positively the reading skills and 20.4% agree for the writing skills. The average value for the influence of the first language literacy on the learning of reading in the target language is 3.68; for the learning of writing – 3.64. This similar data shows a relatively high degree of hesitation about the learning to read and write in the target language, based on the first language. The statement that children who can read and write well in their first language would learn other languages faster also generates hesitation: 16.5% somewhat disagree and 22.4% somewhat agree. However, the disagreeing group is only 22.8% of the sample, while the agreeing group is 38.5%. The average value for this statement is 3.83, which confirms the above thesis. The learning in the first language and then in the official language of the school education is also ambiguously assessed by the teachers: 19.6% somewhat disagree and somewhat agree. 27.5% strongly disagree, and only 6.3% strongly agree. The average for the responses to this statement is 2.88, i.e., entirely in the field of negative assessment. The distributions of all statements along the scale are normal.

With the available data, the null hypothesis was also verified by one way ANOVA test. It states: There is no statistically significant difference in the attitudes towards the students' literacy in the multicultural classroom between the four groups of teachers with different professional experience. The distribution test shows the following values for the F-distribution of the different statements: .599 for the influence of multilingualism on the knowledge of the school subjects; .928 for its influence on the cognitive skills; .358 for the influence of the first language on the reading; .370 for the influence of the first language on the writing; .829 for the speed of learning another language if the knowledge of the first one is good;

.073 if the students first learn to read and write in their native language and then in the other. The critical value of $F_{(5,249)}$

is 2.26 at level of significance $\alpha = 0,05$. All values of the F-distribution are lower than the critical one, so the null hypothesis is confirmed. The professional experience does not influence the attitudes of the teachers towards the literacy of the students in the multicultural classroom.

Discussion and perspectives

The analyses prove that the teachers have some doubts about all questions in the “Literacy” scale. The disagreeing ones are on the average 16.28%, while the somewhat agreeing are on the average 22.95%. Only 14.8% on the average strongly agree. About one third of the respondents agree that multilingualism influences positively the learning of school subjects and stimulates the development of cognitive skills. However, this is not the case for the statement that the learning in the first language first will improve the learning in the language of the school education – 44% of all respondents disagree here.

The data point to reflection on the essence of learning and the teaching of the language. According to Whong (2013, p. 116), a critical communicative approach, which is not only linguistically but also culturally grounded, would be particularly useful. It combines the three ways of acquiring literacy: Focus on Forms, Focus on Meaning and Focus on

Form. They relate to the functionalist, generative and cognitive aspects of the language. The first reflects the usage of the different language forms in individual communicative situations. The second relates to the natural predisposition of the individual to learn the language. The third focuses on the relations between the components of the knowledge, analyzes them and describes the functioning of the language on Meta- and micro-level.

These three points of view cause a change in the understanding of literacy, which should also influence the attitudes of teachers. They need to be convinced more intensely about the role of the general cognitive skills in the learning, not only of the language but also of the other school subjects. The strong negative prejudices about the learning in the first language (mother tongue) should be gradually reduced. By means of further qualification courses, the teachers should be supported to understand the relations between the first language and the next ones that will be taught at school. This is imperative because of the fact that the language is the factor that influences most the formation of the cultural identity of each student.

Conclusion

The study reveals the need to expand the knowledge of the teachers about the positive influence of the multilingualism on the learning. It is necessary to reformulate the requirements to the achievements of the students in the multicultural classroom, which implies a change in the diagnostic tools for measuring their progress. The clear identification of the stages in the cultural development of students from the Romani ethnicity would contribute to their better orientation towards professional success and better adaptation to the changing social environment.

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