Research “about” and “with” children from diverse cultural backgrounds in Poland – dilemmas and ethical challenges

Abstract: The text refers to contemporary research about children from diverse cultural backgrounds in Polish educational institutions. I reflect on the need to decolonise this research and to sensitise scholars to the ethics of research “about” and “with” children. I argue that this should be oriented towards participation and the right to be properly researched, as postulated by J. Ennew. Ethics is crucial in the search for non-discriminatory research strategies (also in the area of affirmative action) due to the dominating research “about” children rather than “with” children or from the perspective of children. I reflect on research practices with children from diverse cultural backgrounds in Polish schools and preschools. I also draw attention to the ethical need to verify research about this group of children in the light of protecting their rights in a new country, language, education system and new culture. The absence of children’s voices and the prevalence of narrations about them as well as the lack of participatory research with this group of children preclude a deeper insight into their situation and ways of looking at the world. With this article I aim at making children’s voices heard.

Keywords: research “about” and “with” children from diverse cultural backgrounds, decolonisation of research “about” and “with” children, intercultural pedagogy, ethics of research “with” and “about” children

Introduction

In this article I argue for the need to look at research “about” and “with” children from diverse cultural backgrounds and decolonise dominant research approaches “about” children in intercultural pedagogy. This involves turning to participatory, engaging approaches, humanising and reflexive methodologies (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009), which consider children’s subjective, non-discriminatory participation in research that concerns them in the area of intercultural education. These postulates refer to problematic, dominant

adultist power relations in research about migrants (both adults and children) and indicate ethical challenges in this area. They are rooted in the transformations in the lives of children from diverse cultural backgrounds in the face of increasing migration processes. They are also connected with a search for new solutions in academic approaches, design and implementation of research with children defined in literature on the subject as culturally “other” (Lahman 2008) or “distinct”. These postulates were emphasised by the British researcher and activist Judith Ennew in her research with and about children. She argued for the need to conduct rights-based scientific research with children and children’s right to be properly researched (Ennew, Plateau 2005) – i.e. to participate and contribute to the research that concerns them (Ennew 1995).

The discourse of “narration about” minorities within minorities¹ (paradoxically, children are a numerical majority in the global population) and representations of refugee and migrant children’s voices, in other words: talking about them, predominates in intercultural pedagogy. As such it draws attention to the need to decolonise research assumptions (Walsh 2013) so as to eliminate Eurocentric and adultist conceptualisations and approaches, hierarchies, patriarchy and prejudices (Cheney 2018) and to speak on behalf of the subaltern (understood as children) (Spivak 1988). Manfred Liebel holds an opinion that in order to decolonise childhood studies, which he argues are an extension of long-term effects of colonialism, we have to consider them as “attempts to understand postcolonial modernity and its problems” (2017: 184). It is thus a matter of interdisciplinary and holistic thinking about theory, praxis and research as social change, initiated by various groups of actors including children as researchers and co-researchers (Liebel, Markowska-Manista 2017; Twum-Danso 2020, Vandenhole 2020).

It must be added that the decolonisation postulated by Liebel refers to post-dependence and postcolonial studies, emancipation philosophies and theories as well as the epistemology from the South and North with a space for an “alternative viewpoint from the perspective of postcolonial subjects” (Liebel 2017: 183). Decolonisation can show how the centuries-old relations, practices and perceptions reproduced and transformed through adults’ knowledge should be interpreted in the context of the power imbalances and relations (Alcoff 2009) between the colonised subject (children) and researchers.

¹ Every child has several identities or multiple identities included in the categories of affiliation or rather their classification into minority groups.

This process also enables us to identify dilemmas connected with the character of conducting research related to the situation of children from diverse cultural backgrounds in countries hosting migrants and refugees. At the same time, it allows us to check whether, how and for what purpose “knowledge” (which is not child-centred) about children and childhood, or stereotypes and clichés, were used in research. This process also generates space in which children’s voices rather than merely their reproductions are/will be heard with their consent (Clark, Moss 2001).

Children from diverse cultural backgrounds – research subjects of intercultural pedagogy

In the research discourse of intercultural pedagogy, children from diverse cultural backgrounds are usually identified through the lens of adaptation challenges, identity crisis, linguistic difficulties and school failure. The perception of their parents as Others or Foreigners (accent, appearance, status, affiliation) is another such factor. Due to the great diversity within this group, it cannot be defined as homogenous, however key categories which are usually treated as objects of research can be distinguished. Referring to this group of children in the context of school, intercultural pedagogy researchers use the following terms: students belonging to national and ethnic minorities, re-emigrant students/returnees, refugee students, students from bicultural families, culturally “distinct” students, foreign students, students from migrant groups, children of mixed couples and students with multicultural background.

Definitions describing culturally diverse groups of students seem to cause disorder and be inadequate to the present social reality and international policy. The fact is that Poland is a home to a new generation of young Poles with diverse skin colours, whose parents are migrants or refugees. Young people who were born in Poland, often feel Polish and do not want to be identified as “other”, “distinct” or “foreign”. The same applies to terms describing the phenomena which often serve (in the case of children) to stigmatise rather than describe. These divisive designates refer to (for instance) dark-skinned Poles and their children who, despite having been born in Poland and raised in Polish culture, and despite their identification with Poland as their home country, are treated through the lens of Polish-centrism (Balogun 2020) as foreigners, inauthentic, “not quite” Poles as opposed to “typical” Poles. Admittedly, it is not an exclusively Polish phenomenon. In other West-

ern European countries with a longer history of migration processes, such as Germany, there are still cases of (for example) non-white Germans or non-biologically German people being perceived as foreigners (Foroutan, 2019).

For the purpose of this article I use the term *children from diverse cultural backgrounds* so as not to victimise a particular group of children. I have chosen it also to avoid emphasising those terms which – while defining identity – can be interpreted in a pejorative way (migrant, refugee, foreigner – social constructs). Moreover, this terminology can be oppressive as it expresses deficiency as opposed to the “cohesion” of the dominant social order (Paris 2019: 220). At the same time, I draw attention to the absence of research “with” children in Poland that would enable children and young people from diverse cultural backgrounds to express their opinions about how they would like to be identified and how they perceive the terminology through which they are categorised and described.

When we take a closer look at research “about” children from diverse cultural backgrounds in schools and preschools, we can see several crucial asymmetries and blank spots. Firstly, this research (designed top-down) is based on the discourse of “subaltern others” (Spivak 1988) or is connected with relations of dependence and multiple power. Such approaches signalling the opposition “us” vs. “them” force children from diverse cultural backgrounds into the definition of a “foreigner as an object to become familiar with” (Walczak 2006: 134) and passive recipients of educational and research practices. They concern children who (as “foreign”) are infantilised and associated with psychological and identity-related aspects of lack of agency (Huijsmans, 2011) in social (not pro-migrant or pro-refugee) discourses (Pietrusińska 2020).

Secondly, we can see that the majority of this research is conducted by researchers from the academy and non-governmental organisations in a model based on gathering knowledge “about” children in the situation of increasing cultural diversity in societies. The research is thus done by non-migrants², presenting and reproducing certain representations seen through the eyes of the privileged majority. There are no researchers from migration backgrounds among authors of this research as the discourse is dominated by local (Polish) scholars, myself included. My intent is not to propose a “Copernican revolution”, but to draw attention to how much we lose by not including

² In recent years, there have been individual studies by foreign or Polish scholarship holders or Ph.D. students – researchers from diverse cultural backgrounds.

the perspective of migrants, their critical reflection on the approaches that can have a positive impact on changes desired in integration models.

The virtual absence of migrant/refugee researchers and their work in research relating to children from diverse cultural backgrounds in Poland deprives us of the possibility to verify the approaches and results of such research, and prevents their voices from being heard in the area of intercultural pedagogy. What is more, without these voices, it is difficult to study and understand children and their families from refugee or migrant backgrounds and different cultural contexts in their new reality of a host country. These voices are important however, as they enable us to analyse and show the situation of children through the perspective of their own cultural, linguistic and social context in which they live and will live in the future.

We thus face an image of incomplete research on children from diverse cultural backgrounds in the reality of Polish preschools and schools fitting into an important area of intercultural pedagogy, which is in this dimension, the research which is oriented to a homogenous voice, to the perspective of the majority. It reflects a binary concept of voice and silence defined by Gayatri Spivak in her seminal publication about the voice of the subaltern (1988: 285).

The “missing link”: research “with” children

The dominant, majority-oriented, passive discourse of research “about” children, rather than “with” children or through the perspective of children from diverse cultural backgrounds in Polish schools or preschools, provoked me to write about an approach oriented towards participatory research “with” children³. This approach (Alderson & Morrow 2011; Liebel 2017; Nigel & O’kane 1998) is based on the ethics of participatory engagement of young people in the research process (Morrow 2008; Alderson & Morrow 2020; Hopkins 2008). A participatory approach in intercultural pedagogy is oriented towards children’s perspectives. It focuses on a given minority group (children) and is conducted “with”, “by”, and not only “about” this group. It is based on respect for human rights in the process of participating in research, taking a focus on hu-

³ It must be noted that this lack of participatory approach in research is a symptom of a broader deficiency of participatory approaches within the society as a whole – so a symptom of disempowerment of children and (frequently) adults as citizens. This kind of attitude is then reflected in research as well.

manising research methodology as Paris & Winn argued in 2014 and ethical symmetry (Christensen & Prout 2002; Markowska-Manista 2018). This way, this type of research meets the “condition of validating groups that were previously unseen in social research” (Wołowicz 2018: 168). Participatory research seems important and socially useful as it provokes a change in research paradigms. Moreover, it opens new areas of understanding the situation of children by (us) adults and children themselves (e.g. a sense of agency). It does so by indicating that we need to change and start thinking about children both as key actors – experts and informants about matters and situations that concern them.

Undertaken within the trend of critical, postcolonial studies in the area of intercultural pedagogy, this research can eliminate the negative phenomena it describes and simultaneously “act” for the groups which are “unheard”, “invisible”, ignored in the dominant social, cultural and political discourse (in other words absent from it, stigmatised or dealt with in a discriminatory way). Children from diverse cultural backgrounds are among such groups. Various scholars draw attention to the specific character of participatory research with children about children’s rights, in which adult researchers should reflexively consider their “epistemological environment” (with reference to potential and expected research results (Nieuwenhuys & Hanson 2020; Liebel 2012; Spyrou 2011, 2018). The scholar believes that this environment cannot be limited to the university (academy) or any other academic institution, but has to encompass children with their different childhoods (Liebel 2020) as well as contexts of their activities in the worlds of their daily lives. As such, this environment is to make research results useful and become a tool for change. Also Feuerherm (2019) argues that research should be useful for the community of research participants and be made available to a broader public.

Only a handful of studies relating to children in schools and preschools in Poland have been conducted in cooperation with non-adult researchers or implemented in cooperation with children and youth. Not many research projects in the area of intercultural pedagogy give children (especially from refugee or migrant background) space to participate. Few of them allow children to articulate their ideas (based on the knowledge of contexts) relating to the ways which can help to develop this type of research and look critically at theory and praxis in accepted models of academic work in the school and preschool environment.

At the same time, making children’s ideas “heard” and treated seriously in academic spaces can be difficult. It is limited by classical approaches to research, “epistemological violence”, the phenomenon of tokenism and the

position of both academic researchers and research objects in the hierarchical structure of power relations. Participatory research “with” children fills the gap and (to a degree) decolonises thinking about children – into treating them as active rather than passive social actors.

To illustrate this approach, let us look at the project: “Counter-stories from Poland: Identities and language identities of adolescent refugee-background students” implemented by A.I. Olszewska in one of Warsaw’s schools. The main method used in this research with children was the so-called human story, to be more exact: a counter-story to the prevalent anti-refugee narrative. Based on humanising methodology, the researcher listened to children and collected their refugee stories and identity portraits in cooperation with the children (Olszewska 2020). The theoretical framework of this study fits into the methodology of counter-narration whose task is to question the dominant discourse describing refugees and create a space for refugee students’ voices (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Another approach can be found in research with children based on Laura Lundy’s model of participation (2007). This approach highlights four factors determining children’s effective participation: space, voice, audience and influence. Space is necessary for children to express their opinions freely and in safe conditions. This voice (as the second factor) needs to be heard – which leads to the third element – the audience. Finally, the audience must be in a position to translate children’s views, needs or demands into practice – that is influence. This influence is a resultant of cooperation not only between children and adults, but also between adults with various opinions (Lundy 2007).

Children’s participation in research is considered to be particularly important. On the other hand, it is also extremely difficult to implement in the case of children from diverse cultural backgrounds. These children do not know the language of the host country or know it at an insufficient level when they arrive, they find themselves in disadvantaged social situations or in a new context of daily life. In such research realities, children can be heard or seen, but they usually do not have influence on what happens to their voices and images (Markowska-Manista 2020). In these conditions, research with children will not meet the ethical principles relating to the protection of children’s rights and ensuring benefits to children as co-researchers.

It must also be noted that children’s participation in research is frequently limited to “symbolic participation” (tokenism) such as consultations, focus groups or fragmentary interviews. It particularly refers to research in which children’s participation involves being informants (respondents), which is

a widespread practice in survey studies⁴. In this case, knowledge provided by children is treated as a resource to be processed by adult experts at their own discretion. Childhood studies researchers argue that this can be counteracted only in situations in which children can participate in all stages of the research process as co-researchers with their own rights and decision-making powers, and can impact the research process up to the stage of result application (Alderson 2008; Punch 2002). However, engaging children as co-researchers has brought new ethical dilemmas and challenges in the case of children in disadvantaged social situations and marginalised children (Markowska-Manista 2018). They result from the fact that adult researchers, especially if they only “visit” the children for the purpose of their field research, simply disappear having completed their studies.

Even if this research aims at allowing us to listen to and see the perspective of children, it will usually be research located on the fourth and fifth level of Roger Hart’s model of participation ladder (1992: 8). Hart indicates that the levels of cooperation with children and youth can be divided into apparent (the first three) and real (the fourth and subsequent) stages. It means that the participation of children from diverse cultural backgrounds in research on matters that concern them is non-existent. Teachers (e.g. through action research), non-governmental organisations, researchers of educational institutions implement and promote children’s active participation in school life, however it is participation initiated and managed by adults rather than child-led participation.

Conclusions

Contemporary discourses about children from diverse cultural backgrounds in Poland are very heterogeneous. They cannot be confined to one discipline of science and compartmentalised to one type of thinking about and research on childhood(s), or one type of research about children and interculturalism. Children are part of preschool and school communities as well as local environments, they live in different contexts: colonial, social, geographical, political, cultural, linguistic and many other. Hence designing new areas of research, for instance advocacy, participation, bottom-up activism, agency and protagonism of children in their own communities, through participatory and action research seems crucial today.

⁴ In these studies all respondents (not only children) are “only” informants.

The application of new theoretical and methodological approaches and the implementation of research not only about children but increasingly more often with or by children based on the ethics of their participatory engagement in the research process opens rarely explored spaces to us as adult researchers. It also provides new ways of looking at, understanding and reinterpreting the situation of children from diverse cultural backgrounds in their new living environments.

These approaches demand considerable efforts in attempts to overcome the frequently stereotypical “obvious truths”. These truths include e.g. schematic patterns in education (Viruru 2005), thought patterns determining research strategies and perspectives on migration and cultural diversity in schools as well as the situation of children from diverse cultural backgrounds in the dominant society. However, redefining and reconceptualising the present paradigms of research “about” children into research “with” and “by” children seems to expose new areas of exploration which are necessary for a holistic view and multi-faceted understanding of children’s situation. The absence of children’s voices and the prevalence of narrations about them as well as lack of participatory research with this group of children preclude a deeper insight into their preschool and school situation and their ways of looking at the world.

It is not only a basic political problem, but also a challenge for the spectrum of ethical principles based on the idea of (individual) self-determination and the idea of dignity of every child as well as social justice already at the stage of preschool and school.

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