Title: Experiencing the acculturation stress by polish children in german schools : between integration and marginalization

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Experiencing the Acculturation Stress by Polish Children in German Schools.
Between Integration and Marginalization

Abstract

The article explores the issues of the acculturation stress experienced by the children living in Gubin (in the Polish-German borderland), whose parents decided to educate and fulfill their children's obligatory school duty in the German cultural environment in the neighbouring Guben. It has been assumed that Polish children's systematic education (regularly living with their parents in their homeland) in German school: (a) contributes to their applying different acculturation strategies in various areas of life, (b) becomes the source of a constant and/or recurrent acculturation stress, which the child at early school age (with no support from the family and the environment of the admitting culture) is not prepared to manage both in the psycho-physical (individual) and social aspects.

Key words: *acculturation stress, integration, marginalization, borderland, multi – and intercultural education.*

Introduction

The undertaken discussion concerns the issues of the acculturation stress experienced by the children living in Gubin (in the Polish-German borderland), whose parents decided to educate and fulfill their children's obligatory school duty in the German cultural environment in the neighbouring Guben.

My stay in the Polish-German borderland in 2004 due to the studies on axiological preferences of the 1st – 3rd grade children inhabiting culturally differentiated

environments (Ogrodzka-Mazur, 2007) and the observation of new phenomena appearing in other investigated areas made me view the issue of acculturation in a broader perspective and repeat the research in 2007–2008 in order to capture the dynamics of this process.

An assumption was made (based on theoretical knowledge of the phenomena subjected to pedagogical analyses, the analysis of research results of particular studies discussed in the expert literature, and my own experience in intercultural education) that systematic education of Polish children (regularly living with their parents in their homeland) in German school: (a) contributes to their applying different acculturation strategies in various areas of life, which become particularly visible in their functioning in the public and private spheres and which change with age; (b) becomes the source of a constant and/or recurrent acculturation stress, which the child at early school age (with no support from the family and the environment of the admitting culture) is not prepared to manage both in the psycho-physical (individual) and social aspects.

Theoretical and methodological assumptions

In the pedagogical analysis of experiencing the acculturation stress by Polish children who carry out their education in the German school, theoretical conceptu-

Table1. Acculturation strategies in J.W. Berre's approach

		Is it of great importance to maintain the native cultural identity?	
		Yes	No
Is it of great importance to participate in the admitting culture?	Yes	Integration	Assimilation
	No	Separation	Marginalization

alizations were applied referring to (1) **John Berre's concept of acculturation**, which presents models of accommodation to functioning in an environment different from the native culture (Berry, 1994, pp. 253–257). Four strategies distinguished by the author, more or less frequently chosen by people in the process of acculturation, result from taking a stance on two issues: maintaining the identity of the native culture and contacting and participation in the admitting culture (Table 1).

Integration is manifested in a positive attitude and the willingness to maintain one's own cultural heritage and in the openness to and participation in the admit-

ting society's life. This is the most beneficial strategy for the individual (correlating with minor health problems) and it is difficult to achieve as it demands cognitive and emotional effort, as well as motivation. The individual has to solve conflicts related to values and reconcile the point of view of the native and the new culture. Assimilation, as the consent for participation in the admitting culture and, at the same time, resignation from keeping the former cultural identity, is most frequently related to: limited contact with people coming from the same native cultures, unwillingness towards it, its negative evaluation, abandoning the language, and sometimes conscious denial of one's origin. What becomes a source of satisfaction and positive emotions are the relations with the members of the admitting culture. In the new surroundings, the individual aims at self-fulfillment and achieving goals – their behaviour, dressing style, speaking manners increasingly resemble the ones of the peers from the accepting group. In the strategy of separation, based on the reversed relationship, the contact with the admitting group is reduced to the necessary minimum and negative emotions dominate them. The admitting culture is perceived from outside, one is an observer rather than a participant. Mutual lack of understanding and of the will to contact is a characteristic feature, withdrawal and unwillingness is its effect. The last and least favourable strategy, marginaliza-tion, is associated with the strongest acculturation stress – it means cutting off and not participating in the native culture, nor in the mainstream of the admitting one. It is often reflected in dysfunctional behaviour, such as: health problems, addic-tions, functioning in the criminal world (Boski, Jarymowicz, Malewska-Peyre, 1992; Czykwin, Misiejuk, 2002; Nowicka, 1998; Wysocka, 2003).

The acculturation process and experiencing the acculturation stress are also related to the individual's perception of the distance between the native and admit-ting cultures. In order to outline the changes occurring in this respect in the case of Polish children, Paweł Boski's theoretical standpoint was applied, represented by his (2) **concept of cultural distance**. It comprises the analysis of cultural distance from the point of view of criteria-related (knowledge of cultural symbols) and cor-relative (behaviour which reflects normative assumptions and values of a particular culture) identity attributes (Boski, 1992, pp. 86–108). The relations are presented in Table 2.

A new perspective in the search for rules which determine shaping the feeling of identity in the changing borderland conditions was offered by the outline of (3) **the theory of identity behaviours,** elaborated by Tadeusz Lewowicki. The theory enables both a comprehensive and comparative grasp of the processes and phenomena taking place in borderlands. The identity fields distinguished by the author become significant determinants of identity behaviour patterns – the first

Table 2. Cultural distance and its consequences for the processes of identity changes

		ATTRIBUTES	
		CRITERIA-RELATED	CORRELATIVE
CULTURAL DISTANCE	CLOSE	• The range of common symbols • Different sign of evaluation • Identity conflict	• Similarity of values, customs and lifestyles • Easiness of acculturation
	FAR	• Strangeness, lack of a range of common symbols • Neutrality, lack of conflict	• Discordant, contradictory values and social norms • Acculturation stress • Identity conflict

field comprises historical vicissitudes and identification with a particular territory and social group; the second is marked by the unlikeness of culture, language, transmission of tradition and the knowledge of the spiritual and material output of society; the third – associated with a special kind of historical genealogy and specific qualities of the groups and the stereotypes functioning within them; the fourth – concerns the industrial and economic conditions and living standards of the group(s); the fifth – associated with the needs, life aims and axiological preferences; and the sixth – taking into account the political, ideological, social and economic context (Lewowicki, 1995, pp. 51–63; Lewowicki, 1995a, pp. 13–26).

In the theoretical assumptions, (4) **the theories of cross-group contact and mutual cross-group diversification derived from the hypothesis of contact** were also referred to (Stephan, Stephan, 1999, pp. 70–97; Hewstone, 1999, pp. 267–282). Concordantly with their broadened model (Figure 1), it has been assumed that the effects (C) of the cross-group contact between the Polish children and their German peers and the teachers are a function (f) of the person (P), situation (S) and social context (SC): $C = f(P + S + SC)$.

Figure 1. Casual model of the hypothesis of contact (Stephan, Stephan, 1999, p. 80)
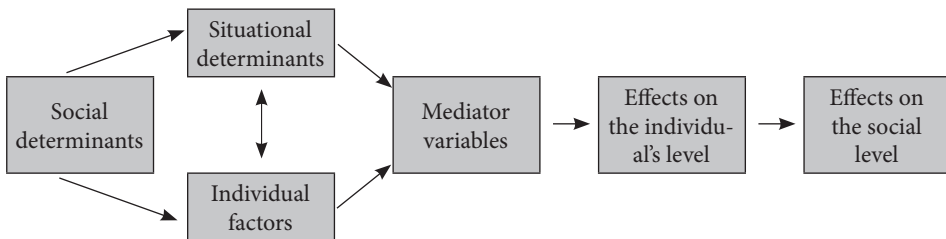
Due to the social and cultural specificity of the Polish-German borderland, the distinguished constituents of the suggested model are the following:

- in the social context:
  - group structure (children's age, gender, place of living, parents' nationality, religion),
  - social and cultural determinants of the relationship between the groups in contact,
  - present relations between the groups,
  - the course of the acculturation and socialization processes in both groups;
- in the situational context:
  - environment in which the contact takes place,
  - character of the interaction,
  - composition of the group,
  - tasks carried out by the participants;
- individual factors:
  - demographic variables,
  - personality traits,
  - stereotypes, prejudice and other beliefs;
- mediator variables:
  - cognitive processes,
  - emotional processes,
  - behavioural processes;
- effects on the individual's level:
  - beliefs (stereotypes and prejudice in particular),
  - emotional reactions,
  - behaviour patterns;
- effects on the social level:
  - changes of attitudes presented in public (especially in the case of stereotyping and prejudice),
  - changes of social norms functioning in groups.

The significance and usefulness of the presented model in the conducted pedagogical studies can be specified, first of all, in the area of interactions between all the factors with the specification of cause-result relations. Secondly, the model suggests the existence (within each category) of several variables which might affect each situation of group contact. Thirdly, the model indicates the factors which can be considered in the attempts to use the contact for improving cross-group relationships (Stephan, Stephan, 1999, pp. 81–83).

Taking into account the applied theoretical assumptions, the methods of collecting and analyzing qualitative-quantitative data were used in the research, with particular focus on the specificity of individual studies on children. Special attention was drawn in the basic methodological assumptions of these studies not only to the researcher's empathic attitude to the examined subject (the child), but also to the aspects of research ethics, to the knowledge of the child's reflectiveness as an interview partner, and to methodological competences of researchers themselves (Köpp, Lippitz, 2001, pp. 158–160). In the analysis of the empirical materials, the reducing and developing way of data transformation was applied and the interpretative approach was followed in the analysis of the meaning of statements in the context of: understanding the examined people's thoughts, critical reasonable understanding and theoretical understanding (Kvale, 2004, pp. 213–231; Miles, Huberman, 2000). In composing a complete picture of the phenomena, the phenomenological approach was used, which consisted in the transition from individual textural-structural relations of meanings and the nature of the respondents' experiences to the synthesis in the form of a universal description of cultural experiences which represents the group(s) as a whole (Moustakas, 2001, pp. 147–149).

In the author's own research, ethnographic observation was carried out, which comprised four stages:

- the first (descriptive observation) aimed at recognizing the area of research examination, as well as the learners and teachers from the 1st – 3rd and 4th – 6th grades;
- the second (focused observation) involved the registration (due to the prepared observation guides) of all the children's behaviour patterns (both verbal and non-verbal) within cultural experience;
- the third (selective observation) enabled the verification of the formulated conclusions and the detailed registration of the children's behaviour patterns which suggest their adaptation to the new life and learning environment in which the norms, values and behaviour models (demanded by the foreign country's culture) are acquired;
- the fourth (self-observation) made use of the principle of reflectiveness, due to which what was subjected to observation was both the researcher and the process of her own assimilation (the acceptance of the cognitive perspective present in a particular field of study) (Konarzewski, 2000, pp. 113–114).

The ethnographic observation was complemented by cultural interviews containing questions which enable to (a) achieve the full picture of the child's functioning in particular areas of life, (b) specify the feeling of identity (including national one),

(c) diagnose the degree of identification with the groups which the child contacts, (d) specify the degree of acculturation, with regard to the competence sphere, the knowledge and understanding of behaviour patterns, and the emotional sphere, both the personal attitude to different events which the children observe and in which they take part and the evaluation of behaviour (Chodynicka, Więckowska, 2005, pp. 370–394). The interviews also comprised questionnaires for parents, which aimed at learning different forms of the children's non-school activities and at eliciting opinions on the ethnic and cultural specificity of the borderland and the transmission of cultural heritage which takes place there.

The studies in the Polish-German borderland were conducted twice:

- in 2004 – the examined Polish children and their German peers attended the 1st – 3rd grades,
- in 2007–2008 – these learners continued education in the 4th – 6th grades.

Altogether in both the 2004 and 2007–2008 research, 100 learners from the Primary School in Guben took part in the studies – 50 children from Poland (26 girls and 24 boys) and 50 from Germany (25 girls and 25 boys). Moreover, 37 Polish parents (31 women and 6 men) participated in the research.

Acculturation process of the Polish learners in the German school – the findings of the author's studies

Feeling of identity

On the basis of the conducted studies and analyses, three basic levels of the pupils' feeling of identity were distinguished in the area of: the I condition, the concept of oneself in the world and the possible contact with the world:

- **low** (minimized feeling) – characterized by the orientation rather towards the surroundings, real world (things, subjects, phenomena) than towards experiencing oneself and the relations with others;
- **medium** – consisting in perceiving oneself as a subject with the simultaneous feeling of agency (the belief in one's ability to influence the surroundings and other people),
- **high** – comprising the fulfillment of all the three fields of the identity feeling: *I, I – the world* and *I – Others.*

In the field of *I*, the Polish children exhibit a high level of *I* feeling. This is derived from the appreciation of religious (in contrast to the German peers) and lay values, truths, vital and hedonistic values. On the other hand, this high level most frequently refers to individualistic behaviour and peer group preferences.

Placing themselves in the world (*I – the world*), all the examined children declare the wish to learn it and lead the life of changes and adventures but with no problems. However, at the same time they cannot understand the world in which they live and do not want to undertake actions to change (rebuild) it. All the learners' medium level of the feeling of identity and agency in this field seems to be related to their experience of various dangers from the world (terrorist attacks, wars, and the abundance of bad politics were indicated among others) and the failure to fulfill the important (especially at that age) need for shaping one's own safety.

The children view their abilities in the sphere of social functioning *I and Others* in a different way, achieving the highest level of the feeling of identity and agency in this field. The learners want to experience Others directly, get acquainted with them, and accept the perceived separateness and/or unlikeness. The children make a clear-cut distinction *I – Others* and the dominant form of social bonds is the instrumental relation and undertaking such activities which may bring notable benefits for *I* on the children's own initiative. In their social functioning, the learners are guided by the opinions of their peers more frequently than of significant adults.

The examined children's level of identity feeling is differentiated not only due to its scope (dimension) and cultural conditions, but also due to their age. Younger learners (grades 1–3) are characterized by an average level of identity feeling which increases with age and reaches a high level in higher grades. Owing to self-improvement, the pupils' integration of cognitive and experience-related functions, and their acquisition of a stable level of school maturity, it may be supposed that also in this period re-organization of one's own person and of the self-image occurs. This means well-balanced development of the feeling of identity, the ties with others and self-fulfillment. The children are also able to specify their own identity in the context of criteria-based and correlative attributes and to manifest the feeling of this identity and a social behaviour related to it. In the perception of one's own person and of others, what becomes significant is particularly positively marked information about oneself, which suggests the advantage of increasing self-esteem over understanding and accepting. This also indicates the need for security and positive self-image (Brycz, 2004, pp. 50–69). This specific bias in perceiving oneself and others seems to be typical of the period of mid-childhood and it also plays a regulating role through the stimulation of activity and development.
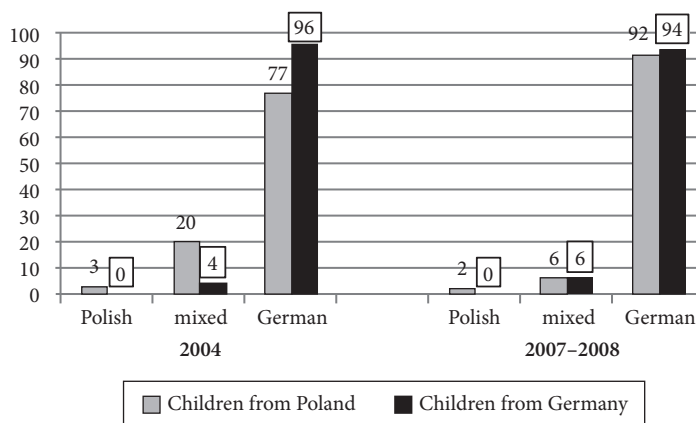
National identification

The undertaken studies also involved an attempt at recognizing and specifying the pupils' national identification, which constituted a specific "conglomeration of objective (observable from outside) qualities of individuals' behaviour patterns

and acts of their consciousness, their self-identification as members of a particular cultural community" (Kłoskowska, 1992, p. 7). It was simultaneously assumed that the children could present various intensity of national identity, which reflects: a weak sense of national identity (Polish identity is weaker than German or the opposite), well-balanced mixed feeling (no dominant identity – I feel equally Polish and German), strong feeling (the dominance of the homogeneous Polish or German identity). Moreover, differentiated intensity of the sense of national identification reflects identity – alienation behaviour patterns.

The contact nature of the Polish-German borderland determines explicitly national identifications of the children in Guben and contributes to the change of national identity of their non-German peers. In the case of the children from Poland, the homogeneous German identity prevails, which means strong identification with national culture of the majority group (Figure 2). Only 20% (2004) and 6% (2008) of the pupils declare the category of well-balanced mixed identity (I feel equally Polish and German) and 2–3% of the children identify Poland as their homeland.

Figure 2. Examined children's declarations of national identification

Individual interviews with the learners also confirm a frequent occurrence of the lack of identification, both with one's own ethnic minority and with the dominant German national culture. However despite the feeling of alienation, the final declarations are German-oriented – the Polish children treat themselves as German and they declare their German national identity. This seems to be enhanced by the school system (these children learn and familiarize with the German language and culture, take part in non-school activities of German educational and cultural institutions) and a high economic status of the majority group. The observed behaviour

of the children indicates that they do not want to stand out in their school and peer environment due to their ethnic origin. That is why they often experience a strong acculturation stress, which contributes to their alienation and to the birth of identity conflict (especially in the field of axiological preferences and norms).

Level of acculturation

Comparing the empirical data from both the 2004 and 2008 studies allows for the claim that, in the case of the learners from Poland, cultural changes occur as a process and they have an acculturative nature. Among other features, this brings about the following:

- the entire change comprises the symbolic sphere (the feeling of identity, language), social structure (peer contact) and the sphere of economic behaviour (living standards);
- the change has a violent course and takes place within one generation;
- it has specific stages (from confrontation of cultures, through adaptation of new cultural contents, to deculturation – applying the models of the foreign culture);
- it causes repeated shifts of the border *familiarity – strangeness, tamed strangeness*;
- it has specific consequences.

The process results either in (a) **assimilation** – related to limiting contact with people coming from the native culture and to unwillingness towards it, its negative evaluation, not using the language, sometimes conscious denial of the origin, and associated with finding satisfaction and positive emotions mainly in relations with the members of the admitting culture; or in (b) **separation** – linked with limiting the contact with the admitting group to the necessary minimum and with the domination of negative emotions – the admitting culture is viewed by the learners from outside, they are rather observers than participants, and what becomes a characteristic feature is the mutual lack of understanding and the willingness to contact, which brings about withdrawal and unwillingness.

The presented considerations do not reflect the complete picture of the acculturation processes which the Polish children educated in German schools face. They merely attempt at seizing, describing and interpreting the characteristic features and tendencies within the discussed issue, which is of due significance in undertaking certain educational activities in multicultural societies. The presented reflections bring about new questions in the context of intercultural theory and practice and, in this way, they enable familiarization with the new socio-cultural reality in which the contemporary Polish child lives.

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