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SPECIFIC FEATURES OF THE EDUCATION OF MUSLIM CHILDREN IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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The paper tackles the requirements of the Muslim children's parents on a change of the form of their teaching in various types of schools in the Czech Republic and the way in which the schools cope with these requirements.

Key words: Muslim, Muslim Children, Education of Muslim Children

To estimate the number of Muslims living in the Czech Republic, we can work on several different assumptions. According to Vladimír Sánka, the chairman of the Muslim community in Prague, the number of Muslims living in the Czech Republic varies between ten and twenty thousand¹, which is supported by the estimations of Dušan Topinka, who supposes that there are 11,235 Muslims living in the Czech Republic.² Thus, Muslims represent only 0.1% of the Czech population.

The interest in Muslims in the Czech Republic is increasing, although the reasons for this development are not clear. The increasing public interest can be explained by three facts.

a) It is expected that in the future the number of Muslims living in the Czech Republic will increase. Their coming may be caused by increasing

¹ R. Břešťan, *Češi mají z islámu strach* [online], [citováno: 2014-4-9], 3.10.2006, <[http://hn.ihned.cz/?m=d&article\[id\]=19432250](http://hn.ihned.cz/?m=d&article[id]=19432250)>.

² D. Topinka, *Výzkumní zpráva: integrační proces muslimů v České republice – pilotní projekt*, Místo vydání neuvedeno, Very Vision, 2007.

pressure in the countries of their origin (wars, riots), as well as migration to the Czech Republic, which may be caused by the relatively higher standard of living in the host society. In the 1990s, the Czech Republic was, for migrants, only a transit country on their dream trip to Western Europe, but now it is being chosen more and more as the target country of this migration. It is expected that this tendency will continue.

b) With regard to the otherness that Muslims represent for Czech society, Czech society lived for many years in a state of relative isolation from the outside world; regarding ethnic and perhaps even religious identity, its composition has been homogeneous for a long time. Only after its opening up to the world in 1989 was it confronted with ethnic and religious differences. To the detriment of Muslims, it is their easily identifiable difference in the form of clothing, religious rites, food, etc., which attracts the focus of the mainstream society in their direction. This interest in Muslims has recently increased in intensity as the Central Muslim Community has applied for the awarding of special religious rights (pursuant to Law 3/2002 Coll. of 27th November, 2001). Granting special rights in this area would allow religion to be taught in public schools, religious services to be performed in the army, prisons and closed medical institutions, religious marriages entered into, and religious schools to be established.

c) Significant stereotypes that appear in the approach of the majority community to the Muslim community include its alleged disloyalty toward the host country, the closed nature of the community, the unequal status of women, and efforts to promote Islam by violent means (partial conclusions from the research study *Islam in the Czech Republic*). Without exaggeration, the approach of the majority to Muslims can be described as negatively biased, this prejudice being comparable to that currently held by the majority society towards Romany people.

It appears that the vast majority of Muslims living in the Czech Republic actually practise Islam. It is not easy to differentiate, as a Muslim is anyone who practices Islam.³ In this context, it is sometimes emphasised that a Muslim practices a lifestyle in accordance with his or her faith, which is reflected in the definition of a Muslim by Hasna, who states that a Muslim is a person who knowingly and voluntarily accepts the Islamic way of life and practises it.⁴ From the above it is evident that the Islamic doctrine projects to a significant extent not only into the experiential world of its supporters, but also into their courses of action. Thus one can expect more frequent clashes be-

³ V. Petráčková at al., *Akademický slovník cizích slov*, Praha 2000.

⁴ M.S. Hasna, *Islam, prirodzený spôsob života: niektoré základné pojmy islamskej viery*, Miesto vydání neuvedeno: Islamská nadácia na Slovensku, 2002.

tween the socio-cultural patterns of the host society and the conduct of Muslims in that society.

One of the possible conflict situations into which the Muslims often get in the host society and which can be caused by their (from the perspective of the host society) unreasonable requirements is the educational process undergone by their children. The number and extent of the collisions depends on the size of the discrepancy between the expectations of Muslim children and their parents and the educational practice of the host country. In this situation, the educational process undergone by the parents, as well as their children, in the previous period, is very important and this previous experience may in fact be very dissimilar. In general, we can identify three basic approaches in the educational process which Muslim parents can meet with. These are the traditional approach on the one hand, the secularly-oriented approach on the other, and an approach lying on the border of these two alternatives, which can be called an integrative approach. All three approaches are immediately reflected in the content of the school curriculum. The traditionally-oriented educational institutions focus primarily on the study of Arabic and the Koran (or on hadiths, i.e. sayings of Muhammad that were captured after his death). In their curriculum, the secularly-oriented institutions correspond to the usual mainstream educational institutions. Integratively-oriented schools combine teaching the Koran and disciplines that are not religiously oriented. From the above it is clear that individuals with experience obtained at a traditional school or an integrative school may have expectations that cannot be fulfilled by Czech schools with an exclusively secular orientation. An important role is also played by the extent to which these individuals receive support from the Muslim community, regarding the normative recommendations on the application of Islamic practices in Europe. As stated by Kratochvíl, the process of creating these rules takes place quite spontaneously and ambiguously, which can make Muslims feel insecure.⁵

In the Czech Republic, education is provided in public and private schools or even in the family environment, where it is provided by the parents (home schooling). The content of the subjects taught in all these forms is mostly secularly oriented; religious education can be provided, as mentioned, only by religious communities which have been granted special permission. Then it is quite understandable that numerous requirements may arise from Muslim pupils, or rather their parents, so that their faith is taken into account in the educational process.

⁵ M. Kratochvíl, *Transnacionalní islám v Evropě: „střet“ kultur a proměna identity*, Diplomová práce, Brno 2006.

Our research focuses on the identification of the requirements (of Muslim children or their parents) that are actively practicing the Islamic religion. We decided to apply a qualitative methodology, namely the technique of semi-structured interviews. Our interview partners were elementary school teachers who are currently teaching or have taught Muslim children, so that the respondents had direct experience of the requirements of these children and their parents related to the forms and the course of the educational process.

In the course of our survey, we came across two rather serious problems. The first was to find a sufficient number of interview partners among teachers (as a result of the above-mentioned low numbers of Muslims in the Czech Republic). These teachers were eventually identified at schools professing a multicultural approach to teaching that were located in large cities such as Prague and Brno. They were also found in municipalities where asylum facilities for applicants for international protection (asylum) operate, i.e. in Zastávka u Brna, Havířov and Kostelec nad Orlicí. Another place with a higher concentration of Muslims was Mladá Boleslav, where there is a community of Kazakh Muslims who were granted asylum in the Czech Republic as a result of their persecution for religious reasons in their country of origin.

The second issue was connected with our lack of experience with the problem areas which the interviews were to deal with. Therefore we could either lead free discussions and wait for the issues categorised by the Czech teachers or work on the basis of experience from abroad, where such problem areas have already been identified, and ask whether these types of issues also appear in the Czech Republic. Finally, we decided on a procedure based on the experience from abroad. Our choice was the United Kingdom, which allows a multicultural focus of education and the persons and institutions in question have long-term experience in this field. Having studied inspection reports related to Muslim schools in the UK, Svobodová has identified numerous specific issues in these schools in comparison with mainstream schools.⁶ The differences observed in her work were widely applicable even under our educational conditions.

Thanks to the British experience, we then identified the following problem areas that were opened up within our discussions:

- separate education of boys and girls;
- dietary habits (demand for halal food);

⁶ K. Svobodová, *Názory muslimů a muslimek na výchovu a vzdělávání muslimských dětí*, Diplomová práce, Brno 2009.

- providing a special area for prayers and ritual washing;
- the teaching of arts;
- the teaching of music;
- physical education;
- sex education.

In our interviews, the teachers mentioned the above topics to various extents. They often stated that as they only teach a small number of Muslim children, they have hardly noticed some of these problems. This mostly applies to requirements concerning the separate teaching of boys and girls; Muslims in this case completely respected local customs relating to joint teaching with regard to the gender perspective. In some cases, the teachers only briefly mentioned this type of problem or added some analyzes of the received requirements.

The requirements regarding compliance with the dietary habits of Muslim children were also mentioned only marginally by the teachers who were interviewed. In a few cases, some teachers were notified by the parents that Muslim children should not consume pork products, and these children were not served pork when eating with their classmates. Usually, though, the Muslim children, according to the teachers who were surveyed, brought food from their homes, which they consumed either separately or together with other children at the time of the lunch break. At one school, the school management offered children meals that would take into account their eating habits, but this offer was not taken up. Nor did problems related to catering occur at various school events, such as school trips and ski courses, as Muslim parents did not allow their children to take part in them because of the alleged high costs of such events. However, it is questionable whether this was a serious argument or just an excuse. It would be useful to clarify this through interviews with members of the community under observation.

The partners who were interviewed have never encountered any requirements (by Muslim children or their parents) with regard to prayers during the classes or a special area designated for prayers. No requests have been noted regarding the overall arrangement and decoration of schools. The parents of Muslim children even did not demand special concessions for their children during the ongoing Ramadan (fasting month), when especially the children at secondary schools (between ten and fifteen years of age) also comply with the prescribed fasting. In a few cases, parents did not send their children to school at the end of the fasting month so that they could celebrate this important religious festival with their family. These requirements were fully respected by all schools.

On the other hand, the teachers reported that they occasionally met with small requirements regarding physical education. These requirements, however, did not concern a separate course of physical education for girls and boys, as physical education at the second level of primary schools takes place separately anyway. In a few cases, the girls insisted on wearing headscarves even during physical education, which some teachers felt represented a potential risk of injury (the snagging of a scarf on sports gear). This was discussed with the parents, and they instructed their children what scarves to wear and how to tie them in order to avoid such problems. Despite the initial surprise of teachers and classmates, this oddity was soon accepted by all parties and ceased to raise any special attention.

The strongest tensions were caused by the Muslims' demands addressed to teachers of art and music. These demands were connected mainly with asylum seekers, who at the time their children entered school had only been in the Czech Republic for a short time and lacked experience of the way these subjects are taught. It can also be assumed that these parents had experience of traditional education. According to the teachers who were interviewed, these parents repeatedly and strongly pushed for their children to be excused from these subjects, pointing out that this is contrary to their faith. The teachers' arguments that this is not allowed by the school curriculum that is in effect had practically no effect. Therefore, the teachers chose the path of negotiation, which concerned the form of teaching, and the parents were also invited to these lessons. In the case of drawings of figures in the lessons of art, the Muslim children were required to use non-figural themes. In classes of music, these children were assigned tasks in music theory, without the need to participate actively in singing. These arrangements were accepted without any serious problems by the Muslim children, as well as their parents. Our project partners expressed surprise at how quickly this solution averted potentially conflicting situations. In all subsequent cases, they have chosen the same path of "adaptation" of children and parents to the local educational conditions.

Regarding sex education, which is also a part of the local curriculum implemented separately according to the gender of pupils, the teachers reported they had not encountered any requirements which would oppose the participation of children in that type of education.

It is obvious that any conflicts between the well-established socio-cultural patterns that regulate the form of educational interactions and the real behaviour of Muslim children in our research set arose only in cases where these children, or rather their parents, had not yet understood the host cultural environment. These problems, however, can easily be over-

come by negotiations and clarification of selected procedures, which in all cases helped to stave off any impending conflicts. On the side of teachers, schools and school facilities, it is necessary to emphasise the fact that they provided enough space for the practice of specific cultural and religious habits, which promoted the process of the integration of Muslim children in these facilities. Our interview partners greatly appreciated the experience of children from the majority society with children from a significantly different cultural environment, which had an overwhelmingly rewarding impact on the behaviour of pupils towards other ethnic groups.

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