

# Muslim Children in Czech Schools

**Pavel Kliment, Jaroslav Šotola**

## **Abstract**

The goal of our empirical study is to present the experience of primary school pedagogues, which they gained from contact with Muslim children (and their parents), who can be perceived as specific participants in the educational process. In order to meet our goal, we chose a qualitative method; for data collection, we applied the method of semi-structured interview. The interviews were conducted with pedagogues at schools that have long-term experiences of educating Muslim children. The paper depicts the expectations of the major players acting in the pedagogical interaction, relating to the forms and course of the pedagogical process. It deals mainly with the expectations of Muslim children, their parents and an educational institution as a whole. The expectations differ in many aspects, bringing about the necessity of negotiating and accepting dissimilarity. The paper results in partial recommendations for responding to other examples of growing diversity in Czech schools in order to maintain the cooperative character of the pedagogical interaction.

**Key words:** Muslim pupils, approaches to Muslim pupils

## **Introduction – Muslims in the territory of the Czech Republic**

The number of Muslims living in the Czech Republic is estimated. According to the 2001 census, 3,699 people claimed allegiance to Islam and indirectly to being a Muslim; in 2011, the number was 3,358 (Census Regarding People and Housing, 2011). The number

probably does not reflect reality, as the answers concerning the declared religion were of an optional character, and many respondents probably did not answer this question. Sáníka, the chairman of the Muslim Community in Prague (Muslimská obec v Praze), estimates there are about ten to twenty thousand Muslims living in the Czech Republic (Břešťan, 2006). In his estimation, Topinka reached the number of 11,235 Muslims (Topinka, 2007, p. 48). If we were to use this information, Muslims constitute only 0.1% of the population.

Despite the low number, the public as well as media pay close attention to Muslims and followers of Islam. There may be several reasons for this. Primarily, possible migration waves are anticipated, which could occur, for instance, as a result of wars, disorders, political and religious repressions, and which could involve Muslims. An important role can also be played by the fact that some Muslims are easily identifiable, for example, on the basis of their clothes, eating habits or religious rites, when such dissimilarity in itself attracts attention and arouses interest. The increased interest may come also from the stereotypical image of a Muslim, which has survived in our society; Muslims and Islam as such arouse associations of possible danger.

Surprisingly, little attention is paid to Muslims and followers of Islam in social-scientific disciplines, which this paper will partially try to rectify. It contains experiences of pedagogues, who, within the teaching process, are or were in contact with Muslim children and, eventually, with some of their parents. We focused on the registration of unusual behaviour of Muslim children and their parents, which had been perceived as the demonstration of the different cultural and religious affiliation. Such behaviour may induce expectations of studied players concerning the forms and course of the teaching process. The findings may be then used by pedagogues acting in similar situations, focusing on creating and maintaining a cooperative character of pedagogical interactions and on avoiding any conflicts.

## 1 Islam, its pluralist displays and pedagogical practice

We cannot predict if the vision about the growing number of Muslims in our territory will come true. However, it can be expected that the increased mobility within the European area may cause that Muslim students will appear in any school in the Czech Republic. It is desirable to have a proactive tool for interpreting some behavioural peculiarities of the studied students, as well as recommendations related to procedures in such specific situations.

There are various forms of Islam, which are given by the different ethnical and cultural affiliation, historical context, initial family situation, which influences the real forms of orthopraxy. As Ramadan puts it, there is only one Islam with regard to its sources; however, there are several ways of its legal application, and the following ways

of concretisation in a given time and place tend to vary (Ramadan, 2000, p. 85). In many cases, during the research, we came across a statement that a vast majority of Muslims do not differ from an individual belonging to the majority of the population. Those individuals could constitute one point of an imaginary scale of orthopraxy; the second point would be delimited by individuals professing Islam in its orthodox forms, whose everyday life is then significantly determined by the belief. The behaviour of Muslims is very variable, often much more variable than that of the members of the greater society.

Surveys conducted in Great Britain show that education is the most important topic of public politics for Muslims (Fetzer, Soper, 2005, p. 38). The aforesaid is given primarily by the role of education for increasing the potential of social mobility. Placing children in secular schools also raises fears that these schools could jeopardise the value system of the young generation based on Islam (Topinka, 2007, p. 7). The collision potential will consist in the contradiction between the expectations of Muslim children and their parents and the school reality of the host country. In this context, an important role is played by the educational process, which their parents as well as their children had gone through in the past.

## 2 Research methodology

To achieve the goal, we selected a qualitative methodology, which is suitable for detecting unexplored and rather rare cases. According to Kostecká, the number of empirical studies concerning the involvement of students with a foreign mother tongue to our educational process is limited (Kostecká et al., 2013, p. 9). The data were collected in the form of semi-structured interviews with pedagogues. The schools were selected in the form of a special-purpose selection; we focused on those institutions, which had some experience with the described segment of students. We chose two ways. In the first case, we addressed pedagogues in schools, which are located in places, where asylum facilities for applicants for international protection exist, and where children of asylum seekers attended one of those schools. In the second case, on the basis of a study of expert references as well as annual reports, we identified schools, which dealt with the education of foreigners, including Muslim children, within their curriculum. In total, nine interviews were conducted with 13 pedagogues from six schools, including headmasters/headmistresses and their deputies, as well as regular teachers with various types of pedagogical experience.

Initially, the conversation partners were afraid if they had enough transmittable experiences; they often pointed out to the fact that the religion was not reflected noticeably in the behaviour of most of the Muslim pupils. However, during more detailed conversations, various aspects of the presence of the difference of these children in our educational system were becoming evident. The interviews were conducted on

the basis of a general framework. First of all, we focused on the definition of the differences between a Muslim pupil and the rest of the students, then on his/her adaptation to the new environment. We also paid attention to the role of parents of such students in the studied processes. Topics studied in countries with greater experience with Muslim pupils (e.g. Understanding, 2004) were inspiring. We were continuously working with the transcribed interviews in the form of open coding, we inserted notes, focusing mainly on the emerging categories showing the regularities or discrepancies in the pedagogical experience. The following text has been structured according to the analysed categories.

The studied schools vary both in terms of geographical distance and size. However, they all have a long-term increased number of students-foreigners in common. In all cases, the management encouraged pedagogues to change the style of teaching, communication with parents and work with the class towards openness to students from a different environment. Although the experience was not directly the main topic of the interviews, it was a kind of main thread: it can be expressed as the transformation of a school in terms of daily operations as well as cognition of the partakers. The addressed schools do not represent an ordinary segment of primary schools in the Czech Republic, and can be, through their experience, inspiring for other pedagogues, who will be confronted with students from a culturally different environment. Many conversation partners were aware of this fact, and their statements had the character of the presentation of results achieved by their home institution, which may serve as a good example. From the methodological point of view, keep in mind that the studied experiences contain self-stylisation components. However, this is acceptable because we do not primarily focus on the *fact* of integration and adaptation of students from a different environment in Czech schools, but on its *social construction* and *representation* in the conception of teachers.

Like Muslims, Muslim pupils do not constitute a compact group either. The addressed pedagogues know this very well; in order to identify a child, not only the religious key, but frequently also the ethnicity or the country of origin was applied. In the interviews, children of refugees or migrants, who had come to the Czech Republic and had undergone the adaptation process, were mentioned unilaterally. Descendants of the second, third generation of migrants were completely omitted, although, for instance, in Germany, it is a hot topic, which is reflected in public discussion (e.g. Faas, 2010, p. 68). Families of converts to Islam were also omitted.

### 3 Identification of differences on the part of Muslim pupils

Muslim pupils are primarily perceived as foreigners. The Islam origin was not described as important as the language difference. Language teaching was found to be crucial; other studies draw the same conclusions (e.g. Vojtíšková, 2012). The language barrier was an obstacle not only to the education process as such, but also to identification of the specific needs of Muslim pupils. Initially, individual prointegration measures were sought rather intuitively. Commonly used tools included tutoring, interpreting, creating individual study plans, or placing students in lower classes.

Dissimilarity appears not only in the form of a different language, but also in many cultural aspects, which our school system considers a matter of course and which are used as the basis ("They are not familiar with common trees, such as spruce, our animals, it is all new for them, they know many kinds of date palms").

A high migration rate is another factor that is typical for Muslim pupils, especially asylum seekers. Children often leave without prior notice, which contributes to the frustration of those, who participated in the process of teaching these students; thus, they are unable to see any impact of their activities. Sometimes, students are under supervision of immigration police, who ask about the school attendance of students; a social services department can play a similar disciplinary role.

The fact that many Muslim pupils are wedded to Islam is often overshadowed. This applies mainly in a situation when the religion is not manifested by a student in any way and that individual tries to fit into the ethnically homogeneous group. The pedagogues did not tend to perceive a Muslim as a stereotype, they emphasised individuality of each student and they sometimes even resisted using the designation of a "Muslim pupil," which is used in our research.

Boys were perceived by the pedagogues as more assertive, with a sovereign position in a family, which sometimes allegedly led to refusal of a woman teacher as an authority. The characteristics of girls were rather related to the level of orthodoxy as understood in the family. While the girls, who did not wear a headscarf, did not differ much, and were sometimes perceived as "assiduous," girls wearing a headscarf were seen as reclusive, not engaging in school life. The last aspect mentioned in the interviews was the level of interest in education, when the source of motivation towards education was sought in the system of values established in a family. The fact of how long the family wanted to stay in our country was important as well.

### 3.1 Assimilation and accommodation as an outcome of negotiations

Assimilation and accommodation processes can be seen on various levels of life (Piaget, 1999, p. 20). In order to define changes, we have chosen a teacher's point of view. We understand accommodation as processes, in which the academic environment changes a pedagogue and transforms his/her sociocultural patterns related to variability in students' behaviour. Assimilation is understood as processes, in which a pedagogue requires adherence to defined rules. The real process of the pedagogic activity will have a form of compromise; within adaptation processes, both the accommodation and assimilation processes can be seen.

Accommodation and assimilation changes do not take place as a jump shift; they result from many communication transactions between participants in a pedagogic situation. A teacher registers the expectations of partakers, thinks about the arguments used, comparing them with his/her experience and putting them in the real conditions of the academic environment. It results in supplementing the existing knowledge, a shift in attitude and modification of pedagogical strategies. With regard to the interpretation perspective, the accommodation processes outnumber the assimilation ones in the pedagogue's statements, which is similar to, for instance, the British experience (Fetzer, Soper, 2005, p. 42). Their dynamic balance would be more evident within the interviewing of Muslim pupils or their parents.

Negotiations take place on several levels at a time. Close attention was paid to wearing of headscarves. All school facilities expressed a tolerant attitude to this issue; wearing a headscarf was perceived as an immanent expression of belief, which should not be forbidden. In addition, the issue of wearing a headscarf was included in academic discussions in order to make fellow students respect this peculiarity ("...a teacher noticed someone had been laughing, so she discussed it with the children ..."). Not all girls wear headscarves; veiling occurs at various ages; parents do not have to be necessarily followed ("...as soon as she reached eighteen, she started to veil herself, her mother does not wear a headscarf ...").

Requirements concerning the eating habits of Muslim children were mentioned only rarely by the pedagogues. Muslim children usually brought their food from home. Problems related to eating at school events, such as trips or ski courses did not occur either, because Muslim parents did not let their children go, referring to the financial demands of such events.

Parents of Muslim children did not even require any special reliefs for their children during the Ramadan (fasting month), when children, especially at the second stage of elementary education (aged 10–15) also fasted. Such parents rarely informed teachers about fasting. At the end of the fasting month, Muslim parents often let their children stay at home with an excuse that they wished to celebrate this important religious

holiday with their family. The aforesaid wish was fully respected by the school facilities ("It is the same as if you forbade our kids to celebrate Christmas").

Minor requirements concerned physical education. In a few cases, girls also insisted on wearing a headscarf during those lessons, which was perceived as a safety risk (a risk of a headscarf snagging on gym equipment). This fact had been discussed with their parents, who instructed their children on what headscarves they should wear and how they should be tied. Despite that, they did not carry out some sports activities. Some Muslim children refused to change their clothes in front of the others, even in front of schoolmates of the same sex. Sometimes, this was solved by enabling them to change their clothes in a separate room, on other occasions, the children came to school already wearing sporting clothes; if they asked to be excluded from physical exercises, they were assigned alternative activities. They entirely refused to take part in swimming courses, which was solved again by alternative activities ("...I cannot imagine that I would force them to participate, we are a school, which teaches tolerance ...").

The highest tension was caused by requirements of Muslims related to art and music lessons. It applied mainly to those parents and children, who had been here for a short period of time and they had little experience with such subjects. Parents tended to push through repeatedly and strongly that their children should be excluded from such subjects, referring to inconsistency with their belief. Teachers chose to negotiate regarding the character of teaching; parents were invited to attend a lesson. During art lessons, Muslim children were assigned non-figural themes or alternative procedures: "We also painted a man, we painted a figure in order to described individual parts, and the children said they could not do that, so we suggested cutting it out, and they agreed." While singing, these children got tasks from music theory without necessarily having to participate in signing. "There was a request not to sing. The child attended music lessons, did not sing, learnt theory and songs as poems." This was accepted both by parents of Muslim children and by the children themselves without any significant problems.

## 3.2 Parents

Communication with parents of children with special educational needs is perceived as very important. It enables pedagogues to understand the background of a child; for parents, it represents an opportunity to become familiar with normative requirements of the institution. In many cases, the addressed teachers described the communication with parents of Muslim pupils as problematic for several reasons. The language barrier, which prevented smooth communication, was present again. Older children of parents or even the students themselves, which was perceived as an extreme and inappropriate alternative, were often used as interpreters. Much communication issues was brought by telephone and written communication. Parents often avoided

contact with the school. They also tended to trivialize educational problems of their children; they generally hid existing problems of both the students and their family, if such problems affected the teaching process. The differences in educational problems of our country and their home country led to the necessity to also explain the apparently natural things related to the rules of excusing or the fact that excursions were not voluntary but were a part of education. Mutual misunderstanding can also result from the fact that parents come from an environment, where it is normal that children do not sing at schools; therefore, they do not breach the religious taboo. The highest tension was caused by the unconditional requests. The abovementioned pressure grew in a situation, when a teacher was addressed by several parents of the Muslim children.

## 4 Diversity as a “problem”

If we concentrate directly on the process of teaching a Muslim pupil, we have identified three basic levels, on which we can study and identify factors influencing its form and results.

1. School; a school as a broader reference group.
2. Class interaction; a class as a small social group (mutual interactions being affected by other players – parents).
3. Teacher; a teacher as a key player determining the group dynamics.

As for the **school level**, it is the overall approach of the institution to diversity. It can vary from absolute rejection to systematic acceptance. The institutional background then determines the rate of supporting or non-supporting inclusive activities towards students from a different environment, who do not speak Czech and do not know our life and institutions. The occurrence of Muslim pupils was initially perceived as interference in the established system; in the studied schools, the situation was improving, teachers were positively motivated and the presence of dissimilarity started to be understood as an enriching element. Obviously, this level can be influenced only partially by a regular pedagogue.

On the **level of a class**, we identified three basic types of relationships directly involving the teacher: relationship with a particular student, his/her parents as well as the whole class. However, these are not the only determining relations. All players and their mutual relationships are represented in the following chart.

TEACHER  
PARENT  
STUDENT  
CLASSMATES



In relation to a new student from a different cultural environment, available means for supporting and integrating him/her must be used, primarily in the form of improving his/her language skills in speaking Czech. Based on their experience, all the respondents agreed upon this fact. However, one should keep in mind that improving language skills should not overshadow all other aspects of integration, which are based on the cultural and religious dissimilarity possibly leading to rejection e. g. by classmates. The question is how should these important attributes of inclusion be treated? According to one of the pedagogues, it would be ideal to approach "a child as an individual, not taking into account what religion he or she belongs to, what skin colour he or she has." To a certain extent, this is paradoxical, because it is also good to know the cultural model of the environment of the country and the family, which determines the new student. The solution is to avoid too much emphasis on the dissimilarity because it could lead to exclusion; at the same time, a pedagogue should be familiar with the student's background, which often explains some peculiarities in his/her behaviour.

A pedagogue often encounters a rootless child, groping in the dark. Existing research shows that parents are often unable to give them advice because they cannot interpret the problem satisfactorily (Nielsen, 2004, p. 118). A Muslim pupil finds himself/herself in an extremely disadvantageous situation, which, in fact, has no optimum solution, always being more or less stressful. According to British authors, Muslim children have to face considerable enculturation pressure at school, which is not recognisable by the players – teachers and schoolmates (Ramadan, 2005, p. 126). In principle, such a student has three options how to respond in those situations. If there are several Muslim children in a class, that student may become withdrawn and refuse the influences of the host society. Another variant is the selection of a certain ambivalence; children participate in the culturally affected curriculum of the school, still remaining faithful to their principles. The last variant is the acceptance of the enculturation pressure by that student in order to integrate with the class, even despite explicit bans from parents, who, however, do not have to know about it.

In communication with parents from a different cultural environment, one should find a way and level of explaining our local specifics and "game rules," including ordinary natural things. One should not shrink from vigorous communication strategies applied by parents. Usually, it is more appropriate to prefer individual consultations; it is purposeful to avoid telephone and written communication. In case of high-pressure behaviour, it is suitable to anticipate long-term negotiations. One should also communicate in situations when the family as such does not signal this willingness; any further communication must be continuously offered at all times.

The presence of a Muslim pupil in a class may become a suitable way of developing the prevention of xenophobia. In this context, the life story of a child can be very strong; if he/she is treated sensitively, the rate of empathy among other schoolmates increases.

Explaining the specific reactions of Muslim pupils to other schoolmates appears to be suitable. Classmates can draw attribution conclusions by themselves on the basis of their experience, and through an informal conversation with a Muslim pupil; it is more appropriate that they draw these conclusions within group discussions moderated by a pedagogue. The inability to tolerate each other may become a factor encouraging negative attitudes or even bullying.

All the respondents stated that they had not encountered any intercultural conflict or clear demonstration of Islamophobia. However, they admitted that they could have occurred if their school had not been characterised by the typical long-term intercultural experience, which taught children to tolerate dissimilarity. In general, students with better grades were accepted to a higher extent. From the pedagogues' point of view, children described as introverted and locked away, which applied mainly to Muslim girls from orthodox families, feel non-admitted.

At the same time, it is suitable to explain the specific approach to Muslim pupils. According to our conversation partners, schoolmates are very sensitive to the issue of justice in duties and evaluation. However, too much emphasis on dissimilarity leads to exclusion from the class, dissimilarity becoming the main label of the child: "If I keep emphasising that he is different, the children would treat him in a different way."

On the **level of the teacher**, a tolerant approach is expected, which can be seen either in the real actions or on the level of the teacher's attitude. It is advisable that both the levels should correspond. The attitudes can be based on external expectations (of the school or the society as a whole) or internal belief.

A sort of uncertainty of teachers can be seen; they express their uncertainty in being in contact with the different culture. Mainly the more orthodox Muslim pupils and their parents bring their belief and habits into the public space of our school system, they require a special approach; thus, teachers do not know how they should legitimise their tolerance to dissimilarity ("It was extremely difficult for us to find the ways, not interfering in their religion"). The pedagogues lack clear external guidelines; external expectations are too vague; the definition of the principles of a pluralistic society is missing. Moreover, teachers realise that the shared stereotypes associated with Muslims do not reflect reality; the experience and behaviour of Muslim children appears to be very wide.

In the teachers' attitude, ambivalence between the external imperative and internal belief is often seen: "I would say, we are too, too tolerant here. Very tolerant." Teachers know they are expected to be responsive to dissimilarity but they have not interiorised and reasoned this approach sufficiently. The ambivalence can be the source of stress and loss of confidence, bringing uncertainty related to limits, rules and their legitimisation.

## Conclusion

One of the things that caught our attention was the discourse grasp of the phenomenon of the occurrence of dissimilarity in various forms by the teachers: "With most Muslims, you don't even know they are Muslims, they do everything they should do, they do not make any problems, they do not require anything extra and integrate with other children easily." The teachers described such behaviour of students, which is within the normative limits of school operation, as optimum ("he was apt," "he was active," "he was hard-working"). Attention is paid to those consequences of dissimilarity, which lead to increased efforts made by a teacher ("more work") and the necessity of more enthusiasm in teaching a student with special educational needs, his/her parents and classmates.

One of the unwritten rules of the current Czech school system, which will be breached by Muslim pupils, is its strictly secular character. It applies not only to particular ways of practising religion, but also to the collection of information about the forms of religious belief. As the following passage shows, religious behaviour in a school is beyond any imagination of the pedagogues: "Regarding religious needs, our school is open to all religions, but we do not practice anything here; no, I can't even imagine that we should have a prayer room here." It seems there is no place for opening any topics of spiritual aspects of world religions and interfaith dialogue in the current situation. The entry of Islam and faith-related topics in the public space, considered inevitable by some Muslims from Western Europe (Fetzer, Soper, 2005, p. 36), will undoubtedly meet with resistance in the Czech environment.

We do not dispute that working with children from a culturally different environment brings extra work and can be the source of frustration and uncertainty. The situation can be perceived as a threat. However, there is another point of view that presents it as a challenge (and it is often done). The presence of a Muslim pupil may enrich the teacher personally and lead to his/her improvement. This can include improvement of knowledge of the culture, religious specifics, but what is more important is the pressure for searching and defining one's own values and meaning of life.

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### Contact:

PhDr. Pavel Kliment, Ph.D.

Mgr. Jaroslav Šotola, Ph.D.

Department of Sociology, Andragogy and Cultural Anthropology

Philosophical Faculty, Palacký University Olomouc

tř. Svobody 26, 779 00 Olomouc

pavel.kliment@upol.cz

jaroslav.sotola@upol.cz