

JANA PECNÍKOVÁ¹, DANIELA MALIŠOVÁ²

THE POSITION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN SLOVAK EDUCATION WITH A FOCUS ON YOUTH

Abstract

Young people are often considered as a driver of democratic progress and development in a country. Thus, civic education alongside freedom of speech, human rights, the rule of law, etc. should constitute cornerstones in advanced societies. The aim of this article is to evaluate the prevalence of the concept of human rights and European values in materials used for civic education in Slovakia. The authors conducted a comprehensive content analysis of 289 domestic and foreign materials and publications used in secondary education schools. While researching the content, we also consulted teachers to identify the main challenges for civic education. The research results show that the human rights and European values are growing in importance and gaining stronger positions in civic education in Slovakia.

Keywords: Civic education, human rights, teaching, values, youth, Slovakia

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge of human rights and values is included in the basic knowledge of a citizen of the 21st century living in a democratic state. Moral rules, norms, and principles or social customs figure into the issue of human rights and values, and their application is constitutionally enshrined. In the past, various proposals have been made to distinguish between what

¹ Dr.; Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia; ORCID: 0000-0002-6596-5685; jana.pecnikova@umb.sk.

² Dr. Ing.; Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia; ORCID: 0000-0003-3983-6190; daniela.malisova@umb.sk.

is the legal delimitation of the boundaries of legislation in this area while maintaining an understanding of rights and ethics in society (Ruz, 1971).

Since Slovakia's accession to the European Union, youth civics has been linked to the *State Educational Program ISCED 2–3*. However, democratic civic education for young people (Melkusova, 2013) is a basic goal in the creation of educational policy in individual member countries. For this reason, several new elements have been added to the content structure of the subject of civic education. These elements include the identification and scope of the activities of European Union institutions or the strengthening of education in the field of human rights and democratic values. Based on these starting points, the research premise of the paper is to evaluate the structure of the thematic focus of the publications and materials used for civic education of young people in Slovakia.

Civic education for young people is also strongly linked to the theory of moral development. Rovňanová (2014) considers it important that young people in schools progressively learn to think morally; consider their decisions; be able to assess alternatives in decision-making processes; use critical thinking; and argue in favor of their decisions, while also learning to accept and think about counterarguments and prove their own arguments. Having the correct foundations of moral development subsequently leads to an ethical or civic evaluation of life situations or conditions regarding society, institutions, and laws. With these foundations in mind, and the ability to distinguish between fair and unfair practices, young people may act as a driver for societal development in accordance with fundamental human rights.

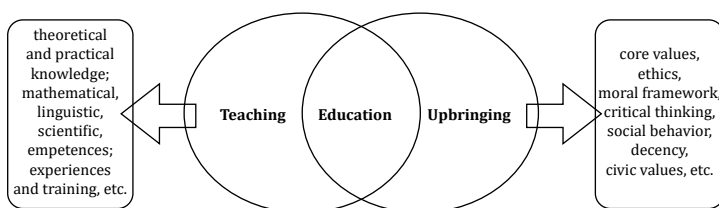


Figure 1. Graphical Expression of Education and Its Components

Source: authors (2022)

From a pedagogical point of view, education as a process is the intersection of two sets. While teaching, as one set, is focused on building hard skills – the acquisition of theoretical and practical knowledge and

competences – the other set involved in education is focused on recognizing and developing soft skills such as the behavior of an individual in society (Figure 1). In traditional pedagogical theory, the emphasis in education is on the content of the set of teaching. The basic principles of upbringing remain a question of family background (Vališová, 2019). At the same time, we consider it important for young people to shape their framework of behavior and value orientation in educational institutions. Therefore, upbringing is an essential part of education. Mollenhauer and Friesen (2013) consider the upbringing of adolescents as a more important part of holistic education than hard skills development itself.

The need to strengthen upbringing is confirmed by Young (2020), who weighs in on this controversy over the shift from traditional teaching towards expanding upbringing in terms of educating young people to social skills and community life. Education should focus on social processes, interpersonal relationships, and their understanding. As a result of these facts, we consider the area of civic education research which we have examined, with a focused priority on the formation of civic values related to human rights, to be topical and beneficial.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND APPROACHES TO THEIR TEACHING

In examining this issue, we dare to assume that for the correct application of human rights and values, it is necessary to know them because, as stated in Roman law, *“ignorantia juris non excusat.”* There is currently a need to integrate human rights into educational processes (McCowan, 2012). In the introduction to this article, we suggest that the position of human rights has been strengthened in youth civic education since Slovakia’s accession to the Member States of the European Union. However, in this context, we consider it necessary to investigate the approaches used to teach human rights.

A long-term sustainable, comprehensive, and effective national strategy for human rights education can include various forms of teaching. A 2003 United Nations publication which deals in detail with this issue can be seen as key. Implementation in education systems may include the integration of human rights education into national legislation, the revision

of curricula and textbooks, teacher education through training on human rights and values education methodology, organizations for extracurricular activities based on schools and local communities, the development of educational materials, the creation of support networks for teachers and other professionals, or the activities of nongovernmental organizations in the field of education.

As stated by Cardenas (2005), education for human rights and values expresses, on the one hand, the human right to education for the population and, on the other hand, the teaching of human rights. The human right to education is enshrined in the constitution in most democratic countries. In the case of the Slovak Republic, this right is governed by *the Constitution of the Slovak Republic*, Act. 460/1992, Art. 42, par. 1 (1992), which states that every citizen has the right to education and that school attendance is compulsory, with attendance set at a minimum of 10 years (9 years of elementary school and 1 year of high school) for students aged 6 to 16 years.

Human rights education serves to define the positive human behavior of members of society. Tibbitts and Fernekes (2011) state that two approaches can be chosen in teaching. The first of these is the critical role of the teacher. When applying the critical role of a teacher, it is necessary to choose a sensitive, thoughtful, and discreet approach to teaching. Educators who want to focus on specific issues such as discrimination, national minorities, racism, etc. should treat these issues as a priority in the context of human rights and values. On this basis, students will more easily acquire the knowledge that a selected problem is part of a larger whole and will build respect for the consequences of violating these rights.

A practical-critical view of the application of this approach in the teaching of human rights is given by Magendzo (2007) in his research on an example of political regime change in Latin America. It states that it was the change in the political establishment that was needed to focus education on building young people's critical thinking skills and eliminating discrimination, inequality, and socio-cultural differences in society.

The second approach to human rights education is focused on the form of education (Tibbitts and Fernekes, 2011). The topic of human rights and values can be cross-sectional in formal teaching to connect taught disciplines such as literature, art, history, social sciences, etc. In Slovakia, formal education on democratic values is mediated primarily through taught subjects focused on ethical or civic education.

As research shows (Macháček, 2008), the teaching of ethical or civic education is at the forefront in Slovakia, above religious education. At the same time, religious education is offered as a subject of teaching in Slovak primary and secondary schools, mainly due to a well-established social custom. However, religious education (Podmanický, 2005) does not need to be understood as being in opposition to civic education, but as a social subject with a different mission associated with specific topics such as faith, love, respect, etc. Research shows that civic education in this context is applied not only in primary and secondary schools but more and more content elements are also taught in universities, with the interest in education in this area among young people increasing by 20% from 2005 to 2007.

Nabeshima, Akuzawa, Hayashi, and Park (2002) confirm that, from a formal point of view, human rights issues are part of social studies. However, systematic human rights education programs can be offered to young people as a separate subject or course. Topics focused on equality, human dignity, tolerance, and peace are often the subject of ethical education. At present, nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations in the field of nonformal lifelong learning are also increasingly focusing on the issue of human rights and values.

Bieliková (2019) conducted extensive modern research in the field of civic education on human rights and values in Slovakia. The research sample was made up of 399 teachers working in primary and secondary schools in the period 2005–2019. In terms of evaluating the method of teaching, 89% of the respondents identified the lesson as the most important source of knowledge about human rights and values. Subsequently, 56.1% of respondents identified school-organized discussions and 55.4% identified school magazines dealing with human rights and values as beneficial for young people. Educators consider the organization of competitions to be the least important source in mastering the issue. In terms of sources of information, respondents stated that they most often use publications on the subject supplemented with supporting materials (40.3%), other teaching aids and materials are used by 18.9% of respondents, and 6.1% of respondents use other teaching methods (daily press, model situations, searching for information on the Internet, etc.). The results of the research also point to the need to increase the time allowance for teaching. As many as 50.5% of the respondents expressed the view that education in the field of human rights and values should be given more space in schools. We consider the conclusions of the research to be genuinely

stimulating and to reflect the current formal setting of the system of youth civic education. We independently follow up on this research by analyzing publications and materials used in the teaching of human rights and values.

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

In terms of methodological approach, the presented paper, based on theoretical background, focuses on youth civic education in the field of human rights and values. The aim of the paper is to evaluate the incidence of human rights and values in materials used for civic education of young people in Slovakia. The main research method is content analysis of sources. In preparing the analysis, we cooperated with teachers working in secondary schools. For this reason, the results obtained are enriched by the opinions and attitudes of these experts from practice. Based on the set goal, we formulated research questions as follows:

RQ₁: What proportion of the knowledge base of civic education is made up of foreign and domestic resources?

RQ₂: What is the incidence of human rights issues in domestic resources used for civic education?

RQ₃: What is the incidence of human rights issues in foreign resources used for civic education?

The content analysis of resources is a qualitative method that is used to analyze documents according to predefined aspects and criteria (Hendl, 2008). In the case of our research, we use materials and publications used for youth civic education. The monitored criteria are the occurrence of topics focused on human rights, freedom, democracy and citizenship, the rule of law, tolerance and equality, and justice and solidarity. The definition of the criteria is based on the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*.

The advantages of the method include the diversity of documents, the nonreactivity of the method, and the stability of data and information. When evaluating the results, we use appropriately selected quantitative methods. We use graphs to interpret the findings.

We consider it important to point out that in the article, we analyze publications represented in the form of books, manuals, brochures,

magazines, practical notebooks, etc. The researched materials are represented in other forms, for example, as audio-visual recordings (films, lectures, etc.) or didactic games. In total, we analyze more than 280 sources. However, as the cooperating teachers state, they most often use a mix of resources adapted to the needs of the currently lectured issues in civic education.

CONTENT ANALYSIS OF PUBLICATIONS AND MATERIALS USED IN CIVIC EDUCATION IN SLOVAKIA

Our empirical research provides an analysis of the domestic materials and publications researched ($n = 198$) which are available to teachers. We offer a content analysis of these materials when verifying the second research question. At the same time, we also include available Czech publications among domestic materials due to language compatibility. Among these sources are publications on subjects recommended by the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic. Subsequently, we analyze the researched foreign publications and materials ($n = 100$) which are available for teaching in English, German, Polish, Hungarian, and Romani. Foreign sources are used by teachers to supplement information, expand the lectured issues, or are part of conversation hours in other subjects. The answer to the first research question is the finding that the knowledge base of civic education comprises 66.44% of domestic materials and publications and 33.56% of foreign materials and publications.

Approaches to understanding civic education agree that civic education is a set of processes that make young people functional and independent members of society (Finkel, 2002) who can argue and hold opinions. The processes themselves can be influenced not only by institutional education but by nonformal education as well. Relationships and attitudes applied or presented within the family, local community, or state can play an important role in civic education. At this point, it is therefore appropriate to consider Tocqueville's theorem that even local political involvement is a manifestation of civic education. At the same time, trust among citizens is the most important feature of a democratic society (Tocqueville, 2000). In this context, we consider it important that the foundations of civic education be part of school education.

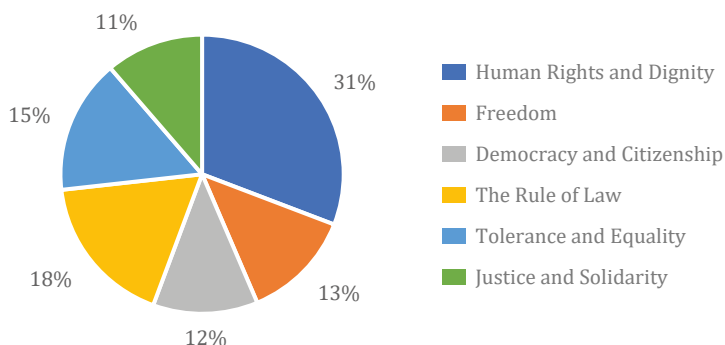


Figure 2. Thematic focus of domestic publications and materials used for youth civic education (n = 189)
Source: authors (2022)

In cooperation with secondary school teachers, who are dedicated to the education of young people aged 15–18, we thematically analyze the publications and materials that are used to teach civic education. The summary results from domestic sources (Figure 2) point to the above-average position of human rights issues in civic education.

Of the examined sources, 21% were available in the Czech language. In terms of thematic focus, up to 31% of resources focus on human rights and human dignity. The resources researched provide basic information on human rights and methodological recommendations for educators who want to dig deeper into the essence of human rights teaching. We positively evaluate the inclusion by several sources of practical aspects in the form of worksheets, tasks, or practical examples of the application of human rights in model situations. We consider such an approach to be beneficial because it points to a borderline situation where human rights and dignity are being violated, with a focus on how to prevent this situation.

From a curricular point of view, the teaching of the topic of human rights takes place in Slovak secondary schools in four teaching units (Lapčáková, 2011). The first unit of youth civic education is focused on defining the concept of human rights and mastering the issue. Subsequently, the issue deepens through an understanding of documents regulating human rights. The third teaching unit is focused on understanding the system of applying human rights in society. The conclusion is a practical repetition of human rights and verification of the knowledge acquired by the students. Education as a whole has an affective and cognitive benefit for students.

The cognitive contribution consists of the relationship to cognition and reason, while the affective contribution arouses the feelings, will, and attitudes of the student (Peľáková and Zahatňanská, 2011). With such a definition, clarifying the importance of human rights, leading young people to respect and understand human rights, and building an interest in promoting democratic rights and obligations, are affective contributions. Cognitive benefits for the student include the acquisition of knowledge about human rights, the basic duty of the citizen to a democratic society, or acquaintance with the political system in the country. It is for this reason that inter-thematic penetration occurs. It is not appropriate to isolate the topic of human rights, but it is necessary to supplement it with the themes of the rule of law, democratic values, or tolerance.

In the analysis of resources and the answers to the second research question, we find that civic education most often focuses on ten human rights and freedoms, including the right to preserve human dignity, the right to a healthy environment, the right to freedom of speech and expression, the right to a fair trial, the right to protection from child labor, the right to peace, the right to rest, and the right to privacy. These rights are mediated to young people through reports from the Office of the Ombudsman, publications from workshops of world organizations such as the United Nations, or the institutions of the European Union. Apart from the above, the resources examined often include at least a separate solution to the issue of justice and solidarity. The issue of justice and solidarity is part of the life of every individual and is applicable in the work, family, economic, social, and health spheres. However, we express the view that the issue of justice and solidarity can be considered as the common denominator of all the other human rights and values mentioned.

In this context, we consider the *Jeden svet na školách / One World in Schools* (2006) handbook to be a comprehensive source for teaching. This publication is published within the project of the nongovernmental organization *Človek v ohrození/People in Need* and aims to contribute in an attractive way to the development of civic education in Slovakia. In addition to methodological texts and practical teaching activities, the content of the online publication also includes documentaries dealing with human rights issues and global topics. When examining the sources, we find that in the last decade, sources have been added that are content-wise related to children's rights, the rights of the elderly, the rights of marginalized groups, and international law. There is also an increase in resources thematically

oriented towards the rule of law and its connection with European structures. It is mainly about approximating the function of European institutions or European legislation.

In addition, the statements of teachers show that the interest of young people is currently focused on issues of gender equality, migration, participation in elections and political events, the rights of LGBT communities, the right to life, and extremism. The issues of multiculturalism and intercultural education also go hand in hand with these topics. It is within the framework of intercultural education that students become acquainted with concepts such as acculturation, subculture, and cultural identity; remove prejudices and stereotypes; and build models of coexistence for citizens of different cultures.

Foreign language resources (Figure 3) serve as supplementary teaching materials for teachers. When examining language mutations of foreign sources, we find that sources in the English language make up 91% of foreign sources. The other 9% are represented by German, Polish, Hungarian, and Romani. The most frequent thematic representation was again recorded on human rights issues. However, the topics of democracy and citizenship, freedom, tolerance, and equality have increased compared to domestic sources. Publications on these topics are available from *Amnesty International*, which focuses on equality issues in relation to women, foreigners, and minorities.

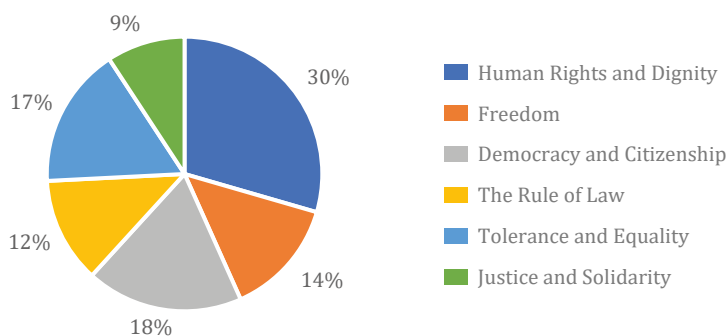


Figure 3. Thematic focus of foreign publications and materials used for youth civic education (n = 100)

Source: authors (2022)

We also welcome the effort to bring the themes of citizenship and democracy closer, which are mediated by resources from workshops of

European Union institutions. From the implemented content analysis, we consider the publication *The politics of diversity in Europe* (2008) to be beneficial. This publication is compiled in the form of a collection of short essays on the topics of diversity, human rights, cultural diversity, and civic participation from the perspective of young people living in member states of the European Union. Sharing the views of young Europeans on various topics can also be instructive for young Slovaks.

The discussion with teachers shows that among the negatives of formal education to be addressed, one of the priorities is the low time allowance devoted to youth civic education. This finding confirms the results of Bielikova's (2019) research. For this reason, we consider it an important activity of nongovernmental organizations providing nonformal education and raising awareness of human rights and values. One example of an intersection between formal and nonformal education is the Living Libraries project. The project is based on discussions involving young people and the general public with people representing various minorities in society and telling a story from real-life experience. The benefit of the discussion is the approach to frame life situations related to war, discrimination, and gender inequality in terms of the violation of rights and values in the everyday life of the individual. In this way, young people recognize when the fragile frontier of human rights is violated and what means can be used to defend themselves

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The growth of democratic and civic values in society is based on the civic education of young people. In the article, we especially appeal to the development of education. And the intersection between the sets of education and upbringing is holistic education. In terms of its content, education shapes value frameworks, which are directly linked to knowledge of democratic approaches, human rights, and fundamental civil liberties. Approaches to human rights education are thus becoming an important determinant of education.

The broader issue of human rights and values is the subject of both European and national legislation. Therefore, the importance of knowledge of human rights has been translated into the educational system, where it holds the most important position in civic education. At the same time,

research confirms that the interest of young people in civic education is growing in Slovakia. For this reason, the aim of the paper is to evaluate the incidence of the topic of human rights and values in materials and publications used for civic education of young people in Slovakia.

Based on the content analysis of a total of 289 domestic and foreign sources, we verified research question RQ1. We find that 66.44% of materials and publications used for civic education of young people in Slovakia are Slovak and Czech. An additional source consists of foreign materials and publications. In the case of foreign sources, we especially appreciate their language availability in the languages of national minorities. We also evaluate positively that topics of multiculturalism and intercultural education have recently begun to appear in civic education. As Orechova (2021) states, we can talk about the internationalization of education by integrating international contexts into the content structures of subjects.

To answer research questions RQ2 and RQ3, we present the following findings. The topic of human rights and values has the highest incidence among other teaching materials on democratic approaches in the domestic sources examined (31% of the total) and foreign sources (30% of the total). However, it is important to note that it is not appropriate to follow this issue in isolation because there is inter-thematic penetration in civic education of young people. The human rights theme needs to be complemented by the rule of law, justice, tolerance, and equality.

In terms of examining the topic of human rights and values from the analyzed sources, the article briefly describes those sources that we believe are most suitable for youth civic education. Of course, each teacher makes a constructive assessment of the resources based on their experience and practice. In conclusion, we would like to take this opportunity to thank all of the secondary school teachers who actively participated in the research. The interpreted findings can be a predictor of a shift in the education and training of young people on democratic approaches and human rights.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is part of the SHARE EU 609162-CITIZ-1-2019-1-PL-CITIZ-REME project Shaping of European Citizenship in Post-totalitarian Societies. Reflection after 15 years of EU Enlargement.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bieliková, M. 2019. *Ľudské práva v škole (Názory učiteľov základných a stredných škôl)*. Bratislava: Centrum vedecko-technických informácií Slovenskej republiky.
- Boillat, P., O'Flaherty, M., et al. 2016. *Handbook on European Law Relating to Access to Justice*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Cardenas, S. 2005. Constructing Rights? Human Rights Education and the State. *International Political Science Review*, 26(4), 363–379. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0192512105055805>.
- Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. March 2012, *Official Journal of the European Union*. Retrieved from: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/char_2012/oj.
- The Constitution of the Slovak Republic*. January 1992. Bratislava: Law Codex. Retrieved from: <https://www.zakonypreludi.sk/zz/1992-460>.
- European Convention on Human Rights*. 1953. Bruxelles: European Court of Human Rights. Retrieved from: https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/convention_eng.pdf.
- Finkel, E. S. 2002. Civic Education and the Mobilization of Political Participation in Developing Democracies. *Journal of Politics*, 64(4), 994–1020. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2508.00160>.
- Hendl, J. 2008. *Kvalitatívny výzkum*. Praha: Portál.
- Lapčáková, E. 2011. *Ľudské práva na hodinách občianskej náuky*. Prešov: Metodicko-pedagogické centrum.
- Levine, P. 2018. *Civic Education*. Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information. Retrieved from: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/civic-education/>.
- Macháček, L. 2008. *Ako sa „učíme“ demokracii na škole?*. Trnava: IUVENTA.
- Magendzo, A. 2007. Pedagogy of Human Rights Education: A Latin American Perspective. *Intercultural Education*, 16(2), 137–143. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14675980500133549>.
- McCowan, T. 2012. Human Rights within Education: Assessing the Justifications. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 42(1), 67–81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2011.651204>.
- Melkusova, H. 2013. Občianske kompetencie a výchovno-vzdelávací proces na školách. *Annales Scientia Politica*, 2(2), 36–41.
- Mollenhauer, K., Friesen, N. 2013. *Forgotten Connections: On Culture and Upbringing*. London: Routledge.
- Nabeshima, Y., Akuzawa, M., Hayashi, S. and Park, K. 2002. *Human Rights Education in Schools*, Vol. 12. Osaka: Asia-Pacific Human Rights Information Center, 45–55.
- Návojský, A., Zajac, L. 2006. *Jeden svet na školách*. Bratislava: Človek v ohrození. Retrieved from: https://clovekvohrozeni.sk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/CVO_Jeden-svet-na-skolach_metodiky.pdf.
- Orechova, M. 2021. Internationalisation of Higher Education in Central and Eastern Europe: Conceptualisation of the Definition Inside the Region. *Acta Paedagogica Vilnensia*, 46, 119–131. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15388/ActPaed.46.2021.8>.
- Peľáková, H. and Zahatňanská, M. 2011. The Search for Aims of Education at the Current Schools. In *International Scientific Electronic Conference*, 573–582.
- Podmanický, I. 2005. *Status učiteľa etickej výchovy v súčasnej školskej edukácii*. In J. Prokop, M. Rybičková (eds). *Proměny pedagogiky*, 231–237.
- Rovňanová, L. 2014. *Rozvíjanie morálneho vedomia žiakov v škole*. Bratislava: Metodicko-pedagogické centrum.
- Ruz, J. 1971. *Legal Principles and the Limits of Law*. Yale: University of Yale. Retrieved from: <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/ylr81&div=37&id=&page=>

- Tibbitts, F., Fernekes, W. R. 2011. Human Rights Education. In S. Totten, J. E. Pedersen (eds). *Teaching and Studying Social Issues: Major Programs and Approaches*, Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 87–117.
- Titley, G., Lentin, A. 2008. *The Politics of Diversity in Europe*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Tocqueville, A. 2000. *Demokracia v Amerike*. Český Tešín: Tešínská tiskárna.
- United Nations. 2003. *ABC: Teaching Human Rights: Practical Activities for Primary and Secondary Schools*. Geneva: United Nations Publications.
- Vališová, A. 2019. Searching of Key Problems of the Contemporary Upbringing and Education in the Czech Republic. *Studia Edukacyjne*, 1(52), 291–302. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14746/se.2019.52.19>.
- Young, M. 2020. Knowledge and the Sociology of Education. *Acta Paedagogica Vilnensia*, 44, 10–17. <https://doi.org/10.15388/ActPaed.44.1>.