

# Taboo Topics in the Classroom

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**SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU**  
**UČITELJSKI FAKULTET**  
**ODSJEK ZA UČITELJSKE STUDIJE**

**DIPLOMSKI RAD**

**TENA DEGMEČIĆ**

**TABU TEME U UČIONICI**  
**TABOO TOPICS IN THE CLASSROOM**

Zagreb, rujan 2021.

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**(Zagreb)**

**DIPLOMSKI RAD**

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TEMA DIPLOMSKOG RADA: Taboo Topics in the Classroom

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## SAŽETAK

U svakom društvu postoje određene teme za koje se smatra da bi ponašanje u skladu s njima bilo u suprotnosti s društvenim, religijskim ili prirodnim normama i dogmama. Takve teme nazivaju se tabuom.

Učestalo je izbjegavanje tema koje su „zabranjene“ iz društvenih ili religijskih razloga, međutim nedostatak edukacije i komuniciranja o njima otežava bolje upoznavanje pojedinca sa svijetom kojim je okružen. Zbog nametnutih normi osjeća se nelagoda pri pomisli na razgovor o rasi, religiji, seksualnosti, smrti, različitostima i mnoštvu drugih tema koje su sastavni dio svakodnevnog života.

Svrha ovog diplomskog rada je definirati i identificirati tabu teme u suvremenome društvu te pristup istima od dolaska u odgojno-obrazovne ustanove. Rad se prije svega bavi vrstama tabua i važnošću upoznavanja djece s tom kompliciranom tematikom te načinima olakšavanja razgovora o različitostima i težnji razvoju otvorenoga društva. Otvorenim društvom se smatra društvo u kojem je individualac sposoban donositi odluke na temelju vlastitog razmišljanja te ima razvijeno kritičko mišljenje i nije pod utjecajem tradicionalnih vrijednosti i nametnutih normi. Već na početku obrazovanja treba početi poticati učenike na razvijanje kritičkog mišljenja. U tom kontekstu učitelji, odgajatelji, kreatori kurikuluma, ali i roditelji imaju važnu ulogu u podizanju kulturne svijesti učenika i razvijanju njihove međukulturne kompetencije.

Ključne riječi: kultura, tabu teme, različitosti, odgoj i obrazovanje, društvo, međukulturna kompetencija

## SUMMARY

In every society there are topics which, if one acted according to, would be contrary to social, religious or natural norms and dogmas. Such topics are referred to as taboo topics.

It is common to avoid topics that are “forbidden” for social or religious reasons. However, the lack of education and communication about them makes it difficult for an individual to become better acquainted with the world around them. Because of the imposed norms, one feels uneasy at the thought of discussing topics such as race, religion, sexuality, death, diversity, and a multitude of other topics that are an integral part of everyday life.

The purpose of this final thesis is to define and identify taboo topics in modern society and access to them from an early age in educational institutions. The paper primarily deals with types of taboos and the importance of introducing this complex topic to children, as well as with the ways of facilitating conversations about diversity and striving for the development of an open society. An open society is considered to be a society in which the individual is able to make decisions based on his/her own thinking, has developed critical thinking and is not influenced by traditional values and imposed norms. Students should be encouraged to start developing their critical thinking in educational institutions. In this context, teachers, educators, curriculum developers but also parents play an important role in raising students’ cultural awareness and developing their intercultural competence.

Keywords: culture, taboo topics, differences, education, society, intercultural competence

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Every county or region around the world has its cultural taboos, and what is unacceptable in one country can be completely acceptable in another. Even though there are many cultural differences around the world, there are still some topics which are considered taboos in all societies, such as: cannibalism, murder, and incest.

It is generally hard and uncomfortable to discuss these topics, because of the values that have been embedded since generations in different cultures. They are seen either as highly personal subjects or offensive to some, and oftentimes people cannot discuss them in a civil manner.

The aim of this graduation thesis is to explain different types of taboos, how they are perceived by people, and whether they should be discussed in schools. The first part of this thesis deals with the definition of taboo and examples of most common taboos known today.

The next chapter is about different examples of taboos, their history, how they are viewed by people, and how they should be approached in schools. Topics such as foul language, race discrimination, religion, menstruation, bullying in schools, teen suicide, and, in the end, death, are terms and phenomena that are present all around us. Avoiding such topics creates even bigger problems, because these are examples of something that will, sooner or later, happen to us, or to someone close to us. In order to be able to act in the right way in some situations in the future, it is necessary to start a conversation about them – the sooner the better. There are a lot of approaches that make conversation about controversial topics easier, and they should be discussed not just with children, but also with parents, the rest of their family, and with other school employees.

## 2. WHAT IS TABOO?

### 2.1. DEFINITION(S) OF TABOO

Taboo or tabu is a Tongan word that means a general ban on a specific object, which should not be touched. “In the languages of Polynesia the word means simply ‘to forbid’, ‘forbidden’, and can be applied to any sort of prohibition. A rule of etiquette, an order issued by a chief, an injunction to children not to meddle with the possessions of their elders, may all be expressed by the use of the word tabu” (Radcliffe-Brown, 1939, p.5).

Taboos can be categorized as norms. According to Drew (2021), in sociology there are four types of norms: folkways, mores, taboos, and laws. Folkways are societal customs that people adhere to. They are frequently implicit, which means that one learned them by being immersed in a culture as a child. These are modest gestures like covering your mouth when yawning, avoiding smoking in close proximity to others, etc. No one will get too offended or upset if a folkway gets broken. Mores are moral norms. Considering that their name comes from the word ‘morality’, the person who violates them is considered an immoral person. Some mores are prohibited (and hence laws), whereas others are not. An example is talking behind a friend’s back. It could be considered immoral, and hence a violation of mores. It is not unlawful to gossip, but it is frowned upon and seen as a breach of moral standards. Mores are the most difficult norms to detect because they can be a folkway, taboo, or a law at the same time. Mores are, in general, considered to be anything with a clear ‘right or wrong’ outcome. They are openly discussed, which makes it easier to understand them. Laws are a state’s enforcement of cultural and social norms. If found guilty of breaking the law, one could be fined, or even imprisoned. Typically, a society will enact rules prohibiting aggression against others, theft, and property damage. In a democracy, society has come to an agreement on what should, and what should not be unlawful. Authoritarian societies may enact numerous mores and taboo laws, but liberal society may only enact laws addressing the most serious violations of social norms. Taboos are social norms that are deemed surprising when they are broken. It is common for no one to talk about them, because they are socially unacceptable and embarrassing. Because they are forbidden, taboos are frequently spoken about in private. They are considered to be private matters that should not be discussed in front of children. While they are not necessarily written into law, though they can be, they are regarded as quite serious.

According to Sumner and Keller (1940), a taboo is a very negative norm that should not get violated because people will get upset. Additionally, one can be expelled from a group or a community. The nature and extent of the taboo are determined by the mores.

The definition of it varies according to region, religion and society. Taboos are considered to be the "permitted and the prohibited, the do's and don'ts" and are "developed by society for its members out of self-preservation, tradition enhancing motives" (Farberow, 1963, pp. 1-2). They can be linked to a culture or religion, but are grounded in morality. That explains why an act that may be taboo in one culture is not taboo in another. Brown (1984) described taboos as "the power of our ancestral behaviors which haunt and control much of our present and to a large extent direct and control our future". Taboos have control over everyday lives, as well as schools and determine the boundaries for what is acceptable and what is unacceptable.

As Bénabou and Tirole (2002) state, "Taboos and sacred values are closely related to identity, in the sense of protecting certain beliefs, deemed vital for the individual or for society, concerning things one 'would never do' and the 'incommensurable' value of certain goods" (p. 830). Taboos are the result of a value or belief system, and are usually a sign of a broader cultural issue that goes beyond the taboos themselves. "When society was simply structured and static, taboos were important because their goal was to preserve the status quo. Breaking a taboo often brought about punishment, danger, or ostracism from society" (Mann, 1984, p. 10). Even though a lot has changed, having a conversation about controversial topics does not feel right, and people tend to feel embarrassed or guilty, as if they are doing something forbidden just by talking about it. Shying away from stigma keeps people from talking about the issues that really matter.

To talk about taboos, one has to learn to talk about everyday issues first. The power of taboo is transmissible, so a prohibition against discussing one controversial topic may lead to a general prohibition against discussion of issues. Topics that are considered controversial or taboo are often hot social issues that tend to provoke strong emotional reactions. A lot of these very sensitive topics revolve around sex, religion, and race. In general, people avoid tabooed behavior, unless they intend to violate a certain taboo.

## 2.2. EXAMPLES OF TABOOS

As already mentioned, an act may be taboo in one culture, and not in another, and there are plenty of examples of common taboo activities and beliefs. Any type of behavior can be considered taboo, it just has to be harmful to an individual or his/her community. Just because something is taboo, does not necessarily mean nobody does it and it does not occur. Sigmund Freud (1938) speculated that incest and patricide were the only two universal taboos and formed the basis of civilization. People in most parts of the world consider incest, but also cannibalism and murder as taboo topics. These are some of the most serious examples. Some of the common taboos are those related to sexuality, religion, race, and food. Taboos that are quite common, but are still not talked about are e.g. abortion, adultery, masturbation, obscenity, pedophilia, racism, slavery, suicide, addiction, birth control, eating beef or pork, premarital sex, homosexuality, menstruation, and some bodily functions such as burping, flatulence, and spitting. It is important to be respectful to other cultural and social norms, and by learning about them, develop an understanding of some of the many ways people can be different (“Examples of Taboos in Societies Around the World”, 2021, retrieved from: <https://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-taboo.html> ).

### 3. INTERCULTURALITY AND THE ROLE OF DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN TEACHING

#### 3.1. WHAT IS INTERCULTURALITY?

According to UNESCO, interculturality “refers to the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expression through dialogue and mutual respect. As Nguyễn (2019) states, interculturality is not the same as “multiculturalism” or “internationality”, which refer to a community made up of members from different cultures living side by side. Instead, the ideal intercultural community consists of members from different cultures who can engage with one another and so mutually enrich individual members as well as the community as a whole.

When discussing interculturality, it is important to talk about connections, and not just similarities. Framing conversations around similarities can align with processes of “othering” individuals who are not the same, and it forces sameness as defined by a dominant group. The word

connections, on the other hand, conjures up images of broader, deeper, and more adaptable ways of engaging to one another. Finding relations and unity among a range of differences is at the heart of making connections (Acevedo, 2016). Not everyone is the same, and differences should not be looked at as something bad. When differences are viewed as a problem, they can be ignored or muted, but when they are considered assets, differences are examined and valued. Children should be encouraged to observe disparities as a way of growing their awareness of their own viewpoints. They need to understand that they, like the children, families, and communities they encountered in books, on television, or anywhere else, have their own opinion. Intercultural understanding is essential for competing in a global society in the twenty-first century.

### 3.2. SUBJECT CURRICULUM OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA FOR THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

The following chapter presents a summary of information contained in the Subject curriculum of the Republic of Croatia for the English language. Educational institutions are places where children need to learn about interculturalism from day one. According to the curriculum of the English language for primary schools and grammar schools, the purpose of teaching the subject is to encourage and ensure the development of communicative and intercultural competence, contribute to students' overall development, and positively affect the development of all core competences. In addition to developing the ability of oral and written expression, communication in a foreign language entails the interpretation and expression of information, ideas, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and values in a variety of cultural and social situations, allowing students to interact with people they do not share their mother tongue with.

Such interaction contributes to the student's awareness and discovery of the world around them, as well as the acquisition of knowledge about different nations and people who speak English. As a result, it leads to intercultural awareness, which benefits the student on a personal, as well as on a cultural and societal level. Learning a foreign language encourages a systematic way of developing creative and critical thinking while also enhancing an individual's intellectual potential. It allows better mobility and a more stable sense of orientation in today's globalized world. Children need to learn English in order to participate actively and responsibly in everyday life in the local and global community. In such a way, they create personal identity and integrity, develop

solidarity and respect for other individuals, and raise understanding of their own culture by communicating with others, which helps them realize their potentials and allow them to continue their education and lifetime learning.

In Croatia, English is taught as a foreign language, and it is taught in all grades and types of education as a compulsory or elective subject. Students learn to appreciate and accept the uniqueness of other cultures, acquire cultural awareness, intercultural competence, and multiculturalism, and build their own positions and roles in different communication relationships, and they gain a level of language skills that allows them to speak independently in English in a variety of circumstances, as well as the skills needed for independent learning as a basis for lifelong education. In order to stress the importance of growing students' knowledge of themselves as individuals and social beings interested in learning about variety, educational systems must integrate the development of interculturalism in the English language learning and teaching program. The development of attitudes and awareness, as well as the acquisition of information and skills about other cultures, is promoted during the educational process in order to build intercultural competence and a greater understanding and respect for various cultures.

### 3.2.1. Intercultural communicative competence in the National Curriculum for English

There are three domains of the curriculum – communicative language competence, intercultural communicative competence, and independence in language acquisition. The educational outcomes of these three domains are intertwined and complementary. Within the domain of intercultural communicative competence, intercultural curiosity, reception of literary and related texts and intercultural encounters are encouraged, which acquire knowledge and develop skills of intercultural behavior, as well as awareness and attitudes about differences within one's own and other cultures, which encourages respect for others.

Students should be able to observe intercultural experiences in a familiar context and identify basic characteristics of the target language's or other cultures, as well as notice similarities with their own culture, recognize and imitate basic patterns of polite behavior in simulated or real encounters, and show interest in learning about different cultures by the end of the first grade. The relationship between language and culture is recognized in the second grade, and the essential features of the target language nations are comprehended. In simulated or actual intercultural

contacts, students should be able to make contact through fundamental respectful behavior patterns and respond curiously to foreign and unfamiliar information. They learn how to interact with people from other cultures. In the third grade, the students learn to compare the characteristics of target language nations to their own culture, to express what they have learned about others and themselves through international experience, and act respectfully in intercultural encounters. The fourth grade is the last grade in which English is taught for 70 hours a year. Students are taught to back up fundamental information about target language nations with real examples and to detect intercultural commonalities. By the end of the year, they should be able to describe what they have learned about themselves and others through intercultural experience, use fundamental politeness standards in intercultural contacts, and detect cultural misconceptions. The number of English language hours per year increases from 70 to 105 in the fifth grade. Fifth graders should be able to apply basic cultural knowledge of the target language countries within their own culture, maintain short and simple communication, and identify and describe basic cultural misunderstanding avoidance and resolution strategies. Students in sixth grade research extra information about the target language nations in order to have a deeper understanding of their culture. They identify good worldviews from other forms of discrimination by describing different examples of intercultural encounters and explaining what they learnt from them. They also recognize and define basic sociolinguistic functions, and avoid stereotypes and biases. Students in the seventh grade will be able to compare their own culture to that of the target language countries, explain the learning process during an intercultural experience, apply basic sociolinguistic functions of language using simple expressions, and explain the dangers of generalizations, stereotypes, and prejudices, as well as the need to break them down. Finally, in eighth grade, students critically link facts about target language nations and other cultures in new situations, choose suitable communication patterns for the given context, and interact with others for their own intercultural communication requirements. They learn how to communicate fundamental techniques for avoiding or overcoming misconceptions, as well as how to identify biases and stereotypes in their own and other nations.

The development of intercultural competence helps the student to reject prejudices and empowers him/her in preventing discrimination and non-violent conflict resolution, and contributes to understanding, expanding, and deepening the student's worldview, which enables him to participate successfully in the narrower and wider community "Odluka o donošenju kurikuluma za

nastavni predmet Engleski jezik za osnovne škole i gimnazije u Republici Hrvatskoj”, 2019, retrieved from: [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2019\\_01\\_7\\_139.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2019_01_7_139.html) ).

### 3.2.2. Intercultural competence and dealing with taboo topics

Taboos are becoming increasingly prevalent in these times of rapid globalization, because they are an important part of intercultural communication. Through intercultural interaction, traditional and modern taboo have become intertwined and recreated. People sort of know how to behave, what to say, and what not to say as long as they are in the cultural environment where they grew up, engaging with others who share their cultural values and views. Havelock Ellis (1948), a British physician and psychologist, reassuringly summed up this internalized knowledge: “Life is livable because we know that wherever we go, most of the people we meet will be restrained in their actions towards us by an almost instinctive network of taboos” (p. 193). Taboos must evolve in a society defined by rapid globalization and changing communication technologies. We should maintain those that safeguard us, but we must also pick which ones to preserve and which to discard.

A Tongan who migrated to Australia after leaving the islands, described a funny but unpleasant situation she found herself in. The first time she came to Australia, she visited her brother who married an Australian who was overweight. She said to her: “Oh, look at you, you are fat!”, which she did not know she was not supposed to say. In Tongan, when someone says that, it means that they can see that her husband takes good care of her and spoils her. In Australia that is an insult, and it is considered taboo to talk about weight. This example demonstrates both how important it is to understand cultural differences in different parts of the world and how difficult it is to do so. Her remark came out of nowhere, and she did not question her approach, but her brother should have told her about it before she arrived. Apart from being a fantastic example of unintended taboo breach in intercultural communication, it is also a good example of a modern taboo. Being overweight is frowned upon in many parts of the world, and most languages have euphemisms for overweight individuals, such as ‘chubby’ or ‘well built’. That is why intercultural competence is important. We need to learn from an early age that there are differences and that something is normal, no matter how different it is from what we are used to. We also learn about what is allowed in other cultures and what is not, and we act accordingly. In addition to building awareness of other

cultures, we make it easier for ourselves to avoid embarrassing situations and unintentionally insulting others in the future.

#### 4. TABOO IN THE CLASSROOM

##### 4.1. OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

Taboo topics are difficult to discuss in any situation, let alone during class. As Evans, Avery and Velde Pederson state (2000), in most classrooms, these kind of issues and topics are “buried under an indigestible mass of facts, stories, and skills” (p. 299), which leads to a lot of teachers not finding a way to start a conversation on such topics in an appropriate way. Unfortunately, what usually happens is that, because of a certain fear, teachers continue to ignore taboo subject matter and de-emphasize related issues and topics. Teachers should not have an intention of breaking taboos for the sake of breaking them, but rather use them for educational objectives (MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001). Discussing taboo topics in school has its positive, but also negative sides. In several studies conducted on the topic of taboos in schools, it has been proven that such topics are motivating to students (Banville, 2005; Bronner, 2002; Hartmann & Faulkner, 2002; Kaye, 2006; MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001). Students feel the need to discuss when it comes to such topics and can always include their personal experience and their views (Dalby, 2007). Taboos have a potential for in-depth discussion and analysis, as Hartmann and Faulkner (2002) propose, which is a desirable outcome in any language classroom. Discussing controversial issues will allow students to practice abilities such as negotiating, agreeing, explaining, justifying and so on. As a result, they produce high levels of student participation not because the activity necessitates it, but because students are eager to share their opinions (Dalby, 2007; Senior, 2007). On the other hand, controversial topics can create personal animosity or reinforce cultural stereotypes, resulting in miscommunication and tensions (Senior, 2007). Also, by discussing such topics in the classroom, teachers risk offending some students and generating conflict between students who have opposing viewpoints (Banville, 2005). That is one of the reasons teachers are avoiding these controversial topics. What can also happen is that students avoid discussions too, because of fear of embarrassment, or because of some past experiences (Cunningham Florez & Burt, 2001; MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001; Deckert, 1996; Kaye, 2006).

Precisely because such topics are not given enough attention and time, there is hardly any possibility of deeper explanation or further research about them. What is important to know is that taboos change as societies change, so topics such as divorce, mental illness, cancer, etc., in some cultures may not be as big a taboo as they used to be. Change is inevitable, but it appears that in this cultural system taboo issues and topics are viewed as a threat to ancestral traditions. Over sixty years ago, Hunt and Metcalf (1955) theorized that problematic areas of culture included: power and the law, economics, nationalism, patriotism, social class, religion and morals, race and minority group relations, sex, courtship, and marriage. These were considered to be “closed areas” where conflicts between actual behaviors and core values and beliefs might be illuminated through classroom discussion. Since these are very controversial topics, talking about them is walking on thin ice. Before any discussion of them, the appropriateness of the topic with respect to the educational institution should be considered and boundaries set. Personal questions should be avoided in the discussion, but students should be encouraged to express their opinions. Such a discussion, where the student is at the center of the activity, or even suggest a topic for discussion, often results in the creation of a good classroom atmosphere, and leads to rich language acquisition “giving learners control of the discourse” (Ellis, 1998, p. 155). This is in line with Nelson’s (1999) study, in which the participants began discussing homosexuality by pondering the implications of two women walking arm-in-arm. The role that the teacher plays during the discussion is crucial. It is crucial to play an impartial role during a class discussion of controversial topics, and the best approach to do so is to initiate a discussion only if it simply follows one that has already begun (Sommers, 2007). If the teacher expresses their opinion, students may get the impression that their opinion is correct or that they will fare better if they think the same way. This is not the goal and teachers should only encourage discussion, lead it and take care that there is no conflict between students.

In research conducted in 2000 by Evans, Avery, and Velde Pederson, a small group of social studies teachers were asked about their perceptions of taboo topics. Based on that research, other literature, and personal experience of the researchers, they have come to a conclusion that strictly taboo topics tend to be personal matters, and they are considered inappropriate and dangerous for classroom discussion. Some of these topics were: pornography, abortion, obscene language, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, and criticism of school administration. Harmon Ziegler’s research (1967) on the political lives of teachers led to the conclusion that “teachers do not regard the

classroom as a suitable forum for the expression by teachers of controversial opinions”. It was also clear that teachers had a fear of sanctions which was probably the reason they would not even try to discuss controversial issues, because “the greater the perception of probable sanctions, the less proper the behavior is perceived to be” (p. 98).

What should also be taken into consideration is the fact that teachers cannot encourage discussion of controversial topics because of the literature they are required to use during classes. Some topics are screened out and replaced by politically correct ones, such as time, hobbies, pets, and so on, at the price of teacher autonomy (Pulverness, 2004). Some attempts have been made to write English supplementary coursebooks recently. There are also coursebooks like *Opportunities: Pre-Intermediate* and *Opportunities: Intermediate* by Michael Harris, David Mower, and Anna Sikorzynska or *New Snapshot Elementary* by Brian Abbs, Ingrid Freebairn and Chris Barker, that cover serious social concerns like racism and disability. The solution to this problem, on the other hand, does not include completely abandoning coursebooks in order to make more room for learner-generated context. If, however, taboo topics show up during the lesson, the teacher should respond with patience and encouragement (Thornbury, 2002).

According to Hartmann and Faulkner (2002), students in an elective course at Aston University presented their favorite taboo nature topics in groups. Songs with taboo themes like incest, child abuse, homosexuality, and narcotics were employed in their study. The teacher functioned as a guide throughout the course, but also acted as a mediator at times, especially when the discussion became too heated, in order to avoid becoming overwhelming with excessive control and frequent interruptions.

A study conducted by Small (2003) was based on survey findings and observation of 80 college students in multiple language classes who discussed controversial topics such as wars, poverty, and AIDS. He noticed that learners were enthusiastic to participate in the conversations and had a good response. They were also thankful for the opportunity to learn something new in addition to English.

Nelson (1999) in her study observed three different ESL courses for two weeks. The participants in the research were students at a community college. The main goal was to collect data on students’ reactions on taboo topic of sexual identities under the supervision of teachers. The implications of two women walking arm-in-arm were the beginning point of the debate,

because Nelson's primary focus was how to build a gay-friendly learning environment. In addition to her own observations, her research included written works, worksheets, and interviews with the teachers and nearly half of the pupils. Nelson was surprised by the fact that the students accepted the topic very well and that even the most reserved ones wanted to participate in the discussions.

A study on teaching controversial topics that was conducted over fifty years ago by Massialas, Sprague, and Sweeney (1970) found that only 16 percent of teachers spend as much as 25 percent of their class time on controversial topics. They considered some controversial topics, race and the Vietnam War, to be appropriate for discussion in the classroom, but were against sex-related topics such as abortion and homosexuality. It was observed that it was easier to discuss the topics related to something recent, that lacks long-term value, than those that are closer and more meaningful to students. Teachers play a critical role in promoting the discussion of taboo topics. They decide whether students can talk about such issues in the classroom, and how the issues will be discussed (Bickmore, 1993).

For example, Khuwaileh (2000) describes a study conducted in Jordan. The research examined at how English for Science and Technology students chose from a list of scientific topics that included taboo subjects. Students had to choose a topic and write on it. The most significant finding of this study was that students were avoiding writing about topics such as AIDS, sexual diseases, contraception, and other similar issues, despite being encouraged to do so. Subsequent interviews with students showed that the main reason they avoided these topics was the fear of portraying themselves in negative light by using disrespectful language. Some of them even stated that they would feel ashamed to the point of being unable to look the teacher in the eyes while discussing such subjects.

Research conducted by Erica Mohan in 2011 addresses the role of teachers in promoting the importance of discussing race and ethnicity in schools. This research will be addressed later in the chapter on racism.

Even though some believe that discussing taboo topics in schools has a positive effect on the development of tolerance, respect for other people's traditions and diversity, in economic terms, there is a belief that schools are primarily aimed at developing human capital, workers who will do the nation's chores without asking too many troublesome questions, serving as a giant sorting machine (Anyon 1980; Apple 1979; Giroux 1981; Spring 1989). It is obvious that people of such

thinking consider any deviation from tradition wrong, or as an anomaly. If the topic of discussion about certain issues is closer to the students and if it arouses their interest, the chances of discussing that topic in schools are lesser. All the above research was conducted among high school students and college students, which shows that there is not enough research with younger students. This may be due to the fact that taboo topics are not presented to younger students at all or are presented very rarely.

## 4.2. EXAMPLES OF TABOO TOPICS IN THE CLASSROOM

Using taboo topics in the classroom can be highly productive, as they often generate high levels of interest and involvement in learners. It is important to consider what makes a topic ‘taboo’. There is no official list of things that one is not supposed to talk about. What makes a topic taboo is the feeling of discomfort that arises when some of these topics come up in a conversation. The first step towards holding conversations about things like equity is to begin with building a common language, and that starts with destigmatizing topics that are typically deemed taboo.

### 4.2.1. Taboo and the censoring of language

In English, offensive and taboo language is most commonly associated with language related to bodily functions, sexual organs, sexual acts, sexual orientation, race and/or ethnicity, animals, gender, and religion (Pinker, 2007; Jay, 2009), and could be classified into these categories: cursing, epithets, profanity, blasphemy, obscenity, vulgarism, and expletives (Pinker, 2007; Jay, 2009; Stapleton, 2010). At some point children learn taboo language, but it is not known when exactly. It is assumed that children are naive to taboo words, and become corrupted or deprived when exposed to them (Heins, 2007; Jay, 2009). Even adults who do not use bad words in everyday speech, know about their existence and know how to determine what would be considered an offensive or taboo word, and what words are non-taboo or good. There are several studies that have dealt with the occurrence of taboo words in children, and some have come to the conclusion that children use taboo word already at the age of one or two, but they do not understand the meaning of the word, they are only repeating it. Besides repeating, children may use name calling or insulting. Research on children’s storytelling has been conducted, and it has shown that sexual

themes are present in the stories of five to ten-year-old children. Sutton-Smith and Abrams (1978) noticed that young children told stories that focused on self-exposure and scatology, whereas the narratives of older children involved more sexual themes and therefore sexual taboo words. It is normal to expect that children at a younger age will use less offensive words, because it is assumed that parents pay attention to their vocabulary when they are around them. School-children use obscene words more often, and also often find themselves in situation where they tease each other, and call their friends by various names. Also, more taboo phrases were collected from boys, than from girls. Swearing and using bad words is a natural phenomenon and children learn taboo words as an integral part of learning during their cognitive and sociocultural development.

When children come to school, there are prohibitions on using particular language. It is expectable that child swearing can be problematic, especially in terms of social consequences (Berges, Niederbach, Rubin, Sharpe, & Tesler, 1983; Jay, 1992; Jay, King, & Duncan, 2006). Every parent raises their children differently and has different rules regarding swearing and the use of bad language that need to be respected. Also, parents tend to treat their male and female children differently. As Jay, T., and Jay, K. (2013) state, “developmental differences between boys and girls may also contribute to gender differences in the progression of swearing throughout childhood” (p. 473). Children develop different strategies to communicate with peers; for example, one investigation indicates that girls are more sensitive to the social impact of swearing on their peers than boys, while boys tend to be more egocentric (Bird & Harris, 1990). According to Allan and Burridge (2006), censoring of language motivate language change, which causes existing vocabulary to be abandoned in a way that they create new highly inventive and often playful expressions. They state that there are “two ways in which new expressions arise: by a changed form for the tabooed expression and by figurative language sparked by perceptions of and conceptions about the denotata (about faeces, menstrual blood, genitals, death and so on)” (p. 2).

In Croatian schools, there are rulebooks adopted by the school board after a discussion at the Teachers' Council. It is a rulebook that determines the rules relating to obligations and behaviors in the school, mutual relations of students, relations between students and employees, socially unacceptable forms of behavior, ways of dealing with school property, health care and safety of students and working hours. Teachers are required to familiarize parents and students with these rules at the beginning of the school year. It is stated in the rulebook what is not allowed on the

school premises, how students should behave and what will be the consequences if students do something contrary to the rules. Swearing is not allowed in schools, either, but, regardless of the consequences that students are aware of, it is still present.

There is no place for offensive words in school, but avoiding them or ignoring them seems impossible. In these cases, teachers have to have a way to deal with such behavior. Teachers have avoided acknowledging these words because they are unpleasant and they inspire profound fear. It is a good idea that teachers discuss their choice of words with their students, because they can understand if those words can hurt someone. If they use swearing to get a reaction, everyone should stay calm and explain why that word was not a good choice, and why it should not be used. Sometimes children swear to fit in socially, and in these situations teachers should ask their students why they swear, and tell them that there are other “cool” expressions they can use to express themselves. If swearing occurs because of anger and frustration, something has to be done so that children understand their emotions, and know that it is fine to feel them, but there are plenty of other words that can be used to describe their feelings. This is one of the problems that should also be discussed with parents. If there are family rules about respectful language, it will be easier to point out when a child is using unacceptable language. These rules should apply to adults as well as children, because adults are in this case seen as role models. Such behavior should not be immediately severely punished, because it is difficult to change one’s habit in a short time. If this behavior continues to occur despite many previous warnings, it is necessary to clearly state the rules, and the consequences that will happen if the rules are not followed (“Swearing: school-age children and pre-teens”, 2021, retrieved from: <https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/behaviour/common-concerns/swearing> ).

#### 4.2.2. Religion

Religion as a topic is less researched because the research cannot be considered scientific or serious. Ayala (2010) states that this is because some scientists believe that valid knowledge can only come from science. They believe that religious ideas are nothing more than superstition and are the remains of pre-scientific explanations of the world. On the other hand, some religious individuals think that science promotes a materialistic worldview that denies the existence of any

reality beyond the physical realm. They believe science is incompatible with their religious faith. This is a reaction that has arisen not only out of fear of breaching the principle of state-church separation (Garcia-Zamor, 2003), but also because it is thought that a professional administration is rather neutral and secular (Houston, Freeman & Feldman, 2008). Furthermore, it is hard to find a concrete definition of religion. It is usually defined as a system of belief in a god or gods and the activities that are connected to that system. Sometimes religion is put in the same basket with culture, or discussed as being interconnected with culture (Massam, 1996), and some other times it is talked about as spirituality (Walker, 1998). Spirituality is portrayed as being individual, while religion is in a way collective. Discussing someone's personal religion is almost universally a taboo topic, and religion itself is deeply personal, so talking about own beliefs can be against the will of someone else. Šoštarić (2019) states that religious prejudice toward atheists, as well as the imposition of religious postulates and ideas, such as attitudes toward abortion or gender ideology, are becoming increasingly evident in Croatia, with governmental structures playing a role. In Croatia, as in other Balkan countries, there is a problem of distinguishing between belonging to a religious community and belonging to a certain nation. That means that the Croatian Catholic Church is considered to be more Croatian than Catholic, just as the Serbian Orthodox Church is seen as more Serbian than Orthodox. Although 86.7 percent of the population is Croatian Catholic, it is a country where other national and religious minorities can build their national and religious cultural identity. As a country, Croatia does not directly discriminate against people who have different beliefs and cultures, and if there are problems related to this topic, there is always a reaction, and the problem is not silenced.

#### 4.2.2.1. Discussing religion in school

Most countries have some form of religious education in schools, either compulsory or optional. Religious institutions strive for greater interaction with their potential members, children, through advocacy for religious education as a subject in schools. That practice is popular in countries such as Serbia, Montenegro, Slovenia, Croatia, Russia and Georgia. The role of religious institutions and their leaders varies from one chronological context to another and in some countries may be a decisive factor in policy-making on religion and education (Bogomilova, 2005). In November 2001, the International Conference on the Elimination of Religious Discrimination and Intolerance in Education was held in Madrid. The aim was to identify strategies to combat

discrimination and religious intolerance and to promote freedom of religion or belief through education. The conference declaration called for increasing students' education and understandings of worldviews of adults, and strengthening education about human rights. There are also schools that ignore or in some way discriminate against minority religious traditions and values. Despite religious education in schools, so called "religious illiteracy" of newer generations still occurs. There is an increase in stereotypes and fundamentalist ideas, the creation of prejudice and intolerance in a modern multi-religious and multicultural society. Due to such cases, it is necessary to introduce new educational programs or revise existing ones, which many governments in Europe started doing. These programs provide learning about the different religious traditions that are possibly found in their country, or anywhere in the world. An approach to religious teaching is developed that aims to spread the student's view of the world. Some approaches tend to involve students to learn about fundamental issues, not just learning about religion as such (Kallioniemi, 2004). Understanding and knowledge of religion is necessary, but perhaps insufficient to increase students' tolerance, and raises the question of the representation and analysis of not only religion, but also culture (Jackson, 2004). The term "religion and education" is used as a general description of various forms of religious education in schools. It may refer to adherence to religious customs and policies on religious symbolism in schools. There are two types of understanding of the term religious education. There is denominational religious education, also known as confessional religious education, and non-denominational religious education, known as non-confessional.

Denominational religious education is traditionally considered to be the type of education which has a goal to produce a religious commitment to a particular religion, to strengthen "the student's faith in a particular religious tradition" (Hobson, 1999, p. 17). It is increasingly the case that denominational religious education in schools in a large number of European countries is making a certain difference between religious education in a particular religion, such as Christianity, Islam or Judaism, and religious education as a part of public education in schools. The goal is no longer to produce a religious commitment to a particular faith, but to enable students to learn how to deal with situations like ethical conflicts, religious traditions, and religious plurality. In countries with this type of religious education, churches and other religious communities have a responsibility for that education in public schools, although in some countries religious education is under the supervision and responsibility of the state. Ethical conflicts and different religious traditions are usually discussed from the perspective of a particular religion. It is mandatory that

the teacher is a believer in the particular religion he teaches, e.g. a teacher of Catholic religious education must be a Catholic.

A non-denominational or non-confessional religious education aims to teach about different practices and religious beliefs without compromising the desire to participate. One type of such education is “teaching about religions”. That means that it is oriented on the non-confessional study of the beliefs, practices and values of a particular religion. The goal of this approach is to understand religion as a sphere of human thought and action. The intention is for people to learn about the principles of different religions in order to develop the social tolerance to which democracies aspire (Batelaan, 2003). School programs that teach about religions, teach about their roles in the historical, cultural, and social development of different countries. Ideally, religion is discussed in a neutral, balanced, and objective way. Religion can be taught as a specific school subject or as a part of another subject such as History, Ethics, Art, Philosophy, etc. The integration of religious subjects is present in all countries, while religious education as a separate subject exists only in some countries. Important values are individual freedom, protection of minorities, non-violence, and defense of the weak. Such a society is based on mutual respect and tolerance (Popper, 1995). According to Kodelja and Bassler (2004), the goal of religious education should be to create an open society in schools, and outside. It is a society in which individuals are confronted with their personal decisions and in which one has learned to be critical of taboos and to base his decision on the authority of his own intelligence.

#### 4.2.2.2. Religion in the Croatian educational system

The Law on the Legal Status of Religious Communities (2013) stipulates that a religious community must not spread intolerance and prejudice towards other religious communities and their believers or other citizens in promoting their religion and acting. At the request of parents, religious education was introduced in pre-school education institutions, and in primary and secondary schools as an optional subject in accordance with the National Curriculum. Religious education in preschool, primary, and secondary school is different from religious education in religious communities. Regardless of whether they participate in religious activities outside of preschool, primary, or secondary school, all children have the right to participate in religious education classes. The Law on Holidays, Memorials and Non-working Days in the Republic of

Croatia (2020) determines holidays and non-working days related to a particular religion, in this case Christianity. Although these holidays apply to the majority of the population, members of certain religions are entitled to a non-working day on religious holidays, such as Christians who celebrate Christmas on January 7, Muslims who celebrate Ramadan and Eid al-Adha, and Jews who celebrate Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. The non-working days determined by law also refer to teaching in educational institutions. However, not all students practice the same religion and there is no special law that answers the question of whether students of other religions may be absent from school during their holidays. It is assumed that if employed family members can be given a day off, the absence of students from school on that day could also be justified. On this issue, there is a visible difference in the rights of students who are members of the most represented religion and the rights of students of minority religions.

#### 4.2.3. Race taboo

Racism is defined as a negative intentional action by individuals with an attitude toward racial prejudice. It can happen at any time and anywhere – at school, at work, and even at home. Racism can affect every aspect of an individual’s life, and people who are victims of racial discrimination have unequal treatment when it comes to education, finding a job, housing and similar. Racism is structural, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized. David Wellman (1977) summarizes racism as a system of advantage based on race. These advantages are referred to as “white privilege” (McIntosh, 2012). According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, white privilege is defined as “the set of social and economic advantages that white people have by virtue of their race in a culture characterized by racial inequity”. Racism is a part of today’s society, and it is not a phenomenon which happens occasionally. In most cases it benefits whites, and rarely ever people of color. Prejudices and discrimination against people of color are backed up by social and institutional power, because whites hold these positions in society and “infuse their racial prejudice into the laws, policies, practices, and norms of society in a way that people of color do not” (DiAngelo, 2016).

Racism is, by whites, often seen as a thing of the past, but it continues to exist and develop in every society. The incidence of racism does not decrease, but increases as the years go by. Robin

DiAngelo (2016) states that “the gaps in wealth and access to resources are not the result of some people working harder than others. They are the result of some people being in the institutional positions to exploit others” (p. 110). There are a lot of examples where it is shown that people of color do not have the same treatment in areas of life such as: wealth, health care, and criminal justice. For example, if a white person, and a person of color have the same symptoms, people of color will be taken less seriously, and receive fewer recommendations for treatment (Ansell & McDonald, 2015). Although racism is not over-represented in Croatia, it is necessary to discuss this topic and learn about the equity of all people. In this way, new generations without prejudices are created, and they will not allow other people’s opinion to have an impact on the way they behave.

#### 4.2.3.1. Talking about racism

Conversation around race has their own specific language, and students need to be fluent in this language in order to have this conversation. Teaching students about equity is not about imposing one’s own opinion or teaching them what to think. Students have to be able to express their opinions and attitudes without condemnation. A teacher should give their students the tools, strategies, language and opportunities to practice how to think. In her book *Can We Talk About Taboo and Race? And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation*, Beverly Tatum (2007) urges teachers to find courage in themselves and to be honest and open in talking about discrimination and racism. These conversations are almost always uncomfortable, and that is one of the reasons why most of the teachers avoid them. She asks, “Can we get beyond our fear, our sweaty palms, our anxiety about saying the wrong thing, or using the wrong words, and have an honest conversation about racial issues?” (p. 13). She calls on those in higher positions in educational institutions to advocate for promoting dialogue about racial issues, and to be the role models to their employees and younger generations. It is important to “cross racial and ethnic boundaries and connect with others different from ourselves” (ibid.).

It is not early to have these type of conversation with children in lower grades, because they are aware that people are similar or different, and that there are many different components that make our identities. They are also able to see that some people are being treated differently, but they do not know the reason why. If they do not discuss such topics at home with their parents or families, they should be given the opportunity to learn more about it at school. School should be a

place where students, without the presence of their parents and their pressure, can openly express their opinion which may be different from what their parents represent, and do that without restraint and shame. Unfortunately, the school environment in most cases is not like that. An example for that is the research conducted by Erica Mohan (2011). One of the participants stated that the teachers are too afraid to be the first person to talk with their students about race and culture. That unless something is in the textbook, they do not learn or talk about it, because teachers are still afraid to step outside of the box in that category. The main reason for that is that they're too afraid to step on anyone's toes, get in trouble, or end up offending anyone. Other participants had similar opinions, but they also pointed out that there is a certain fear among teachers that dealing with such a topic could offend someone who would then contact a superior, in this case the principal, and the teacher could very easily lose their job. It is clear that such controversial conversations cannot always go in the right direction, and that there will always be a person who will be hurt, but that cannot be the reason to deny the knowledge to the rest of the class. If something is not talked about, it makes it more of a taboo.

#### 4.2.4. Gender inequality

Gender equality is a human right and it is necessary for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. A world where such equality exists would be a perfect world, which is not the case today. People are discriminated on the basis of sex or gender. As defined by the Oxford Dictionary, gender inequality is a social process by which people are treated differently and disadvantageously, under similar circumstances, on the basis of gender. As Cecilia L. Ridgeway (1997) states, "A system that advantages men over women in material resources, power, status, and authority (i.e., gender hierarchy) has continued in one form or another despite profound structural changes such as industrialization and the movement of production out of the household, women's accelerated movement into the labor force after World War II, and, most recently, women's entry into male-dominated occupations" (p. 218). This is also the reason that encouraged the development of stereotypes. Perhaps certain stereotypical beliefs will always exist or be replaced by new ones, but it is possible that such topics and problems will always be talked about, discussed, and encouraged to change. Feminism as a social movement has been present for more than 100 years, at least in the sense in which it has become noticeable to the public and encouraged thinking and some change. Society today looks different than before, but the fight for gender equality and justice is far from

over. The changes achieved so far have opened space for insight and discussion about other obstacles and problems.

Discussions about the upbringing of girls, the roles, characteristics, skills, and expectations that are imposed on them from birth and that affect their daily professional and family life as an adult, are constantly present in public discourse. That, awareness of the problem, and discussion are a key step towards change. The issue of gender inequality and gender stereotypes has another side related to prejudices and stereotypes towards men. While girls are seen as more emotional, gentle, tidy, smart, intuitive, boys are messy, mischievous, and aggressive. Women learn to be responsible, and to use their emotions, develop ambitions and aspirations. When they grow up, women face socially set barriers that look at gender in relation to skills and abilities. Throughout history, women have been at a disadvantage compared to men in terms of gender inequality and gender stereotypes. The problem is with gender inequality in general, both to men and women. Socio-historical movements and processes led to the conclusion that the inequality towards one implies inequality towards the other (Mayer, 2018).

#### 4.2.4.1. Gender inequality in school

Children learn from the examples of their parents, and they express these attitudes in the classroom. Education Agency argues that it is necessary to organize workshops not only for children, but also for parents. While working with children, non-discriminatory knowledge about both genders should be promoted, gender inequality and gender stereotypes eliminated, peaceful communication taught, and violence against men and women prevented. What is also important is to have different activities in schools, throughout which students can learn more about gender equality, for example, the difference between sex and gender. One is a biological characteristic, and it means that someone can be a male or a female, and the other one is the social shaping of sex. There are always some gender differences between boys and girls, which can be seen, perhaps in the way they dress, or how their hair looks, etc. What is considered as a normal way of dressing in one culture, is not in another, and that is also something that needs to be discussed. Furthermore, a certain way of dressing that used to be usual in the past does not apply today, for example, girls wearing trousers instead of dresses and skirts. From this example came the idiom “to wear the trousers” or “wear the pants”, which means to be in charge or control of a relationship or family.

This phrase is typically applied to a woman, because the trousers were historically only worn by men, and they were the ones making decisions in a household.

There are many ways to introduce these topics to young learners. Education Agency offers several examples of good activities. For example, there is a fun activity where one can prepare photos of boys and men wearing shirts, pants, and suits, men in historical costumes, men in skirts (from East and Southeast Asia) or in kilts (from Scotland). Also, photos of women in different type of clothes and hairstyles can be chosen. The photos are arranged face down, and the students make up a crew of aliens who have just landed on Earth, and based on these photos they have to conclude who is living on the Earth. After that, a discussion about gender and cultural similarities and differences will follow. It also needs to be explained how stereotypes and prejudices affect the building of self-esteem, attitudes and expectations of the way a boy or a girl have to behave. A good way to introduce children to gender differences is to talk about the many fairy tales in which the main characters are princesses and princes. Fairy tales thought in primary schools are written in a way that shows that women are helpless and need the help of a man to succeed in life. There are many examples, such as Snow White, who was saved by the prince, Cinderella, to whom the prince also ensures a normal life, the Little Mermaid, who changes her whole life, just to be with a man, and so on. These are traditional stories that should continue to be taught, but discussion of the story itself should also be encouraged. Millions of children are familiar with Disney adaptations of traditional stories and fairytales. Giroux (1995) noticed that “these films inspire at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching specific roles, values, and ideals than more traditional sites of learning such as public schools, religious institutions and the family” (p. 25). Since these films are likely to have a part in the development of children’s cultures and may impact their and adult’s understanding about families, it is only logical to evaluate the themes and messages romantic Disney films offer to youth about love and romance. Women’s roles in Disney films are partially owing to Walt Disney’s personal feelings about family life influencing the Disney Company, and partly due to his ideas mirroring patriarchal cultural beliefs about what roles women should play in society in the 1940s (O’Brien, 1996). He integrates patriarchy into fairy tales by removing or downplaying female characters’ self-empowerment while emphasizing male power in his stories. Disney’s simplistic depictions of gender roles also assisted. According to Tonn (2008), there are three major ways in which Disney films deviate from the original story. First, the plot is altered. The plot of Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* centers around religious notions

of the impoverished obtaining entrance to paradise through love and suffering, which was replaced with a girl giving her voice in order to live happily ever after with a prince. Second, there are no female characters. The mermaid's sisters, not the prince, come to her rescue in Andersen's story, and the grandmother is absent from the Disney version. Finally, the story has been simplified. On the other hand, there are also a lot of new stories whose main characters are females who are successful and can solve their own problems without the help of a man. An example of that type of a story is in a movie called "Brave", about a girl named Merida. In conclusion, children have to learn to do all the work in the class regardless of gender, notice that the quality of work done in school is not related to gender, develop knowledge about the need to respect diversity.

#### 4.2.5. History of the period taboo

Whether it is talking about menstruation, menstrual hygiene, menopause or even buying sanitary pads or tampons it is often a taboo topic. The ovum was discovered in 1827, and it was not until 1863 that menstruation was linked with the ovary and its products. That managed to remove some of the mystery related to the menstrual cycle, but it did not help in making it a less of a taboo. It is hard to explain the origin of these taboos, but there have been a number of superstitions involving the menstrual process in women. For example, Ashley Montagu (1952) states that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century during the menstrual cycle, women were barred from wine-making, mushroom picking, silkworm-tending, and sugar refining, to safeguard the products of these industries from ruin. These restrictions vary depending on the culture, which is why there are other cases where women were forbidden to touch or look at weapons, game animals, boats, they were not allowed to touch their own body, other's dishes, clothing or any personal belongings. A certain fear existed that was related to any kind of a contact with 'damaging fluids', women's touches or even gazes.

It is not known why any of this is considered bad, or controversial to talk about. Talking about menstruation as a taboo leads to the conclusion that women have feelings of shame regarding this topic. It is also not known which sex is responsible for considering menstruation a fearsome thing, for "If an event appears uncanny to one part of the population, soon the other part begins to wonder about it, even if it was at first taken for granted. Eventually it may cease to matter who was first to react with awe" (Bettelheim, 1954, p. 245). It can be speculated that the physical condition and behavioral changes in women during the menstrual cycle had an impact on creating a negative

impression among men and other women. A lot of theories about the origin of menstrual taboos are centered around the menstrual flow or the menstrual blood itself. Whether women's feelings of shame came from women themselves or arose as a result of men's condemnation, is unfamiliar.

#### 4.2.5.1. Period taboo talk

Due to the existence of negative feelings towards just the thought of menstruation, there is not enough time devoted to the discussion about that subject. It is necessary to make changes and encourage students to develop a positive opinion about it at an early age. Most girls get their first period around the age of twelve, but some will start menstruating even at the age of nine or earlier. That is one of the reasons why parents and teachers should be the ones preparing the girls at home and in the class as soon as possible. What needs to be discussed in front of the class is simply that menstruation is normal – it is not a sickness, and it does not have to be a secret. An increasing body of research suggests that girls often learn nothing about menstruation before its onset and many hide their first period because of fear, confusion and embarrassment. It is important that children have a clear understanding of their bodies, especially since it is impossible to know when a girl will get their first period. Despite the growing local and global attention paid to this natural process, significant knowledge gaps persist.

The conversation in schools about menstruation takes place at about the age of 12, when, on average, girls enter puberty. Even then, the conversation is mostly about the features of puberty and in such a short time everything is briefly explained. There is no time for detailed education that is desperately needed. Schools should be more open about the importance of menstruation and more empathetic to the shame that girls endure. For instance, schools should provide resources and information available to girls. This will help them comprehend what is occurring to their bodies during puberty, rather than being afraid of it. These conversations in school usually include only girls, and Richards (2017), as an educational sexual health worker, states that talking to boys about it in schools sounds good in practice, but in reality is very difficult. Most of them avoid talking about that subject, because it is not their problem. What he also noticed is that boys behave differently when they are in mixed groups, and in single-sex groups. The boys in mixed groups tend to be more unsympathetic and disrespectful, while the ones in single-sex groups have more

understanding about periods. Menstruation is not discussed during classes, except in sex education class. In the first half of the 2000s, began the discussions on sex education in primary and secondary schools in Croatia. A controversy developed between the two approaches: liberal, which was based on research, and conservative, which was based on religion. There is currently no such subject in the Croatian educational system. Topics in the field of sexuality have been incorporated into the interdisciplinary topic of health, for which a special curriculum has been adopted. Menstruation has always been considered a sensitive topic, because it is directly related to female intimacy. That is one of the reasons why parents do not talk about it with their children while they are younger. Some of them are even strictly against discussing these kind of topics in lower grades, because menstruation is associated with sexual maturity. Most adults have well-founded knowledge of sexual topics, and based on that knowledge they make a connection with sexuality and menstruation and develop a feeling of discomfort in conversation about that specific topic. However, the thinking of children and adults is very different. Children at that age have no knowledge of certain concepts, and do not associate menstruation with anything sexual. Just because a topic is considered sensitive or controversial, does not mean that it should not be discussed. As with other sensitive topics, responses must be culturally and locally based and adapted. Such topics should be approached carefully, but also patiently and courageously. That is also a great time to combat social taboos and false information about menstruation that can hurt students' well-being.

#### 4.2.6. School bullying

Bullying is commonly defined as repeated harmful behavior in which there is imbalance of power between groups (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). School bullying is increasingly attracting the attention of the professional public and there are more and more media reports that indicate the presence of the most extreme forms of this phenomenon. It can occur in schools, campus, or outside of school, but it is due to relationships created in school settings. Bullying can affect not just the many children going through it, but also their parents, friends, and their school. There are many types of bullying, such as: direct and indirect bullying, cyberbullying (which happens online), physical (always involves physical contact), emotional (causing emotional hurt), sexual (any bullying related to a person's gender or sexuality), and verbal bullying (using any form of language

that causes distress). Bullying is a serious problem that needs more attention, and it requires a schoolwide approach. It is unfair and one-sided behavior that happens when someone keeps hurting, frightening, threatening, or leaving someone out on purpose (Gulbrandson, 2015). The main reasons for bullying reported most often by students are physical appearance, race/ethnicity, gender, disability, religion, and sexual orientation. The problem of bullying will not disappear on its own, and it can have serious consequences (Gordon, 2019).

Talking about it might not be as big of a taboo, as it is doing something about it. Unfortunately, the only form of violence that is addressed in schools is physical violence, because it is visible when it happens. Very little attention is paid to the psychological abuse that leaves most severe consequences. Bullying begins when students enter kindergarten, but many programs wait until the upper grades of elementary school to address the issue, even though there is evidence that peer group rejection in kindergarten may continue throughout the primary school (Buhs, Ladd & Harald, 2006). Vreeman and Carroll (2007) have concluded that, to stop bullying, it is best to use multidisciplinary or “whole-school” approach. That includes school policies, classroom curricula, teacher training, individual counseling, and conflict resolution training. Given that abuse in all its forms is a serious problem in schools, it is important to include everyone in the learning environment in solving this problem. In schools, it is good to use activities that can help teachers find out what students consider to be bullying, whether they know how to recognize the participants, how they would act in such situations and who to turn to, if it ever happens to them. For example, the first activity can be *Agree or disagree?* in which the teacher would read some statements, and students have to decide whether they agree or disagree that the statement is considered bullying. A good activity to learn different types of bullying can be a group activity where each group gets cards with examples of bullying behaviors, and they have to put the cards in order starting with the most serious at the top. After they have done that, the discussion about their choices, and the seriousness of different situations can start. With the help of a specific bullying story or a short video, a discussion can be initiated about who the participants are, how they abused the victim, and what the students would do if they found themselves in the place of one of the people in the story/video, who would they talk to. Students can be divided into groups and in each group one student would be given the role of one person from the story. If the problems related to abuse are not being discussed in time, it can lead to the worst.

#### 4.2.7. Teen suicide

The number of young people trying or committing suicide is on the rise everywhere in the world. Since 1950, the adolescent suicide rate has quadrupled and it is the third leading cause of death in this age group. Faigel (1966) estimates that, for every successful suicide in adolescence, there are between 50 and 100 unsuccessful attempts. The topic of bullying may not be a taboo topic, but the consequences that it leaves on young people are kept a secret. On the one hand, such an attitude is understandable because the subject of death, especially the death of young people, is very difficult to discuss, but, on the other hand, it has to be discussed to raise awareness that are the possible cause of such outcomes. The media can also play a major role in teaching about bullying and seriousness of adolescent suicide problems. Unfortunately, that publicity is being used completely in a wrong way. Blanco-Castilla and Cano-Galindo (2019) state that the media pay less and less attention to what impact they can have on the audience. The focus is most often on the details of the event itself, that is, on the person who committed suicide and in what way. From the psychological point of view, suicide can be seen as escape behavior. The suicide rate of adolescents is higher than the suicide rate of adults, because adolescents have not learned to deal with certain difficulties and react impulsively because they believe there is no other way out.

There is an info-sheet made by the Canadian Mental Health Association that provides guidance to educators for discussing these topics. They state what is needed, and should be done in these situations, but also what should be avoided. For example, what should be done is to provide factual information about suicide, share warning signs, dispel myths, talk about available supports and pathways, encourage and model self-care resiliency and also help students to seek help from trusted adults, inspire hope, and give help-line numbers and list adults who can help in these situations. What should not be done is make suicide the sole topic of an assignment, use inappropriate language, show images of people who committed, or images that glamorize these type of stories, emphasize celebrity deaths by suicide, discuss methods or any personal stories related to that act, suggest simple explanations for suicidal behavior, or in any way portray suicide as a way to solve problems. If a situation arises in which there is a need to discuss suicide, the educator has the opportunity to educate students in the right way and with accurate information, share warning signs, describe supports, and inspire hope.

#### 4.2.8. Death taboo

Given the average life expectancy, it is not surprising to think about death as something that will happen far in the future, and that any discussion about death at an earlier age is unnecessary. A recent survey found that only around one in three people talked about making a will, or their funeral with their partners. These research participants believed that too many discussions about death made it seem closer than it actually is, but later on became more aware of the importance of this topic. When one discusses such a subject, consolation can be found in religion. In every monotheistic religion there is life after death, but it is talked about differently, taking into the consideration which religion we are talking about. This realization of life after death in a way facilitates death and the thought of it, because it is, in fact, only the death of the body, while the soul lives eternally.

Otto Rank (1930) states that society has created different mechanisms, that are meant to keep people from becoming conscious of their animal nature. Everything about people, that might implicate creatureliness and mortality is covered by a cultural “shield”. Also, the philosopher and psychologist Ernest Becker states that “the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity – activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destination of man... primates were not bothered by the fear of death” (Becker, 1973, p. 17). The more people talk about death, the less sensitive of a topic it will become. Duncan Sayer (2010) states that death itself is not taboo, because it happens in public, and in private, but some sociologists assume that, for example, museum displays have the ability to affect modern social attitudes towards death. Museums have softened death by allowing people to explore their relationship with mortality, but without private emotional expression (Walter, 2004).

##### 4.2.8.1. Discussing death in the classroom

The way people understand death is often influenced by movies and TV. Death is considered to be scary, but the way it is shown on TV makes it look even scarier. If there was enough desire and will, schools could easily introduce the theme of death in some already existing subjects. For example, science, biology or even literature class can be good subjects for discussing death. In many works of children’s literature, some of the characters die.

A large number of picturebooks deal with the theme of death, and with their help this tragic and confusing event can be more easily explained to children. Reading such picturebooks can help develop empathy and open minds to new ideas. Most importantly, children will have time to reflect on their experiences from a safe distance. Billingsley (2021) gave a few great examples that can help introduce children to this topic, such as *The Memory Tree*, written and illustrated by Britta Teckentrup. It is a story that begins tragically with a fox laying down and going to sleep forever, but after that it is full of heartwarming moments. There is a tree growing where the fox is buried, and his friends from the forest gather around and tell loving stories about him. The more friends talk about the fox, the more the tree grows. Eventually this tree becomes large enough to be a shelter for all his friends and gives them strength. In this way, children can be aware that even though someone is not physically there, that through the story that person can always be a part of their lives. Another good example is *The Funeral* by Matt James, which is very straightforward. The picturebook tells of the death of an uncle whom the children did not know very well and they encounter this event for the first time. Since the children do not understand the seriousness of the situation, what remains in their memory is that it was an event where they met their relatives who they rarely see, and they were happy because of it, even though the adults were sad. Children approach such events in a different way than adults, so this book is a great choice to see themselves and their perspective and how different it is from the perspective of adults. A book that does not focus on death as much as on living with a person after learning they are going to die soon is *Ida, Always*, written by Caron Levis and illustrated by Charles Santoso. It is a story inspired by a real pair of polar bears from New York's Central Park Zoo. Children have to learn how to prepare not just for the death of a person, but also for the death of their beloved pet. A picturebook that describes what to do when a pet dies, but in a humoristic way, is *The End of Something Wonderful* written by Stephanie V. W. Lucianović and illustrated by George Ermos. A lot of people successfully deal with difficult life situations through black humor and this book does a great job considering that type of humor. In addition, between all the jokes, it successfully deals with feelings in that confusing moment. There are also two very special books about death of grandparents. One is called *Ocean Meets Sky*, by The Fan Brothers, and the other one is *Cry, Heart, But Never Break*, written by Glenn Ringtved and illustrated by Charlotte Pardi. *Ocean Meets Sky* is a story about a boy who has recently lost his grandfather who would always tell him stories about a place where ocean meets sky. They had an agreement that one day they will visit that place together. Because

the grandfather died before their trip happened, the boy built a boat to set sail and find that place on his own. *Cry, Heart, But Never Break* is a tale about a dying grandmother, in which death is shown as a visitor in grandma's house. Some grandchildren pretend not to see her, but together they come up with a plan to trick death. When grandma's time eventually comes, the children ask why grandma has to die, to which Death tells them a wonderful story about the purpose of dying. In addition to picturebooks, there are also fairy tales which are dealing with the subject of death. A character dying in a story can be an excellent starting point for a discussion about what happened to that character, what impact that event had on people close to him/her, what needs to be done in such a situation, and how it might have been easier for everyone if they had prepared for it. The most famous fairy tales, like Cinderella or Snow White, reveal at the very beginning that the main characters in the story do not have a parent or parents. As mentioned earlier in the thesis, in addition to discussing gender equality, a conversation about the lives of the characters before a particular story was written can be initiated. In this way, students can create their own story about what happened to the parents of the main characters or other family members, and once they tell their stories, a conversation on that topic can be further encouraged during the homeroom meeting. These conversations need to become a part of education, so that possible unwanted consequences could be changed. Penfold-Mounce (2018) states that death, dying, and the disposal of the deceased may all become part of the everyday if transparency is created through education. Furthermore, by normalizing discussing about death in schools, students may be able to help their families in feeling less fearful of death and making more educated decisions about the end of their life.

## 5. CONCLUSION

For an analysis and deeper understanding of taboo topics, one needs to learn a lot about his/her own history and culture, and also the history and culture of different people all around the world. We have shown that taboos are conditioned by various factors – e.g. cultures and beliefs, and that they have deep roots in our society. They differ around the world, but some taboos are present in most societies. Controversial topics should be approached with caution, but should not be ignored out of personal fear either.

By discussing taboo topics in educational institutions, the development of critical thinking in children is encouraged, as well as their intercultural competence and awareness of the world around

them. Children develop their own opinions, and discussing such topics at an early age can encourage them to know how to react correctly in the future if they happen to encounter such a taboo situation. Also, from the collected information we can conclude that almost no research on the prevalence of taboo topics in teaching was conducted in lower grades, only with older students. The Subject curriculum of the Republic of Croatia for the English language has three domains. One of them is intercultural communicative competence, which is very important for understanding and learning about other cultures, and taboos. Teachers need to use age appropriate activities to introduce learners to these controversial topics. In order to know what kind of activities are adequate, they need education and training – both as part of their initial education, and later, as part of their continuous professional development. The research mentioned earlier in the thesis makes it clear that students are open to discussing such topics and that, if properly guided, they successfully come to conclusions on their own. However, it is not only teachers who decide what will be discussed in class. A significant role is played by curriculum developers, who can help by providing guidelines for teachers.

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## **Izjava o samostalnoj izradi rada**

Ja, Tena Degmečić, studentica Učiteljskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, izjavljujem da sam ovaj rad izradila samostalno uz uporabu navedene literature i konzultacije s mentoricom.

U Zagrebu, 24.9.2021.

Potpis:

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