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## INTERCULTURAL COUNSELING AS A CURRENT ISSUE AND WHAT MAKES A COMPETENT INTERCULTURAL COUNSELOR

### INTERKULTURALNO SAVJETOVANJE I INTERKULTURALNE SAVJETNIČKE KOMPETENCIJE

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#### *Abstract*

In the first part of the paper, the author finds that in the present the question of collaboration between members of the majority and the members of cultural, religious, social and other minorities is one of the most essential civilisational questions. Consequently, intercultural pedagogy and intercultural education play an important role here. Due to such multicultural conditions, school counseling, too, has developed some special features. Furtheron in the paper, the author defines and presents the characteristic features of intercultural counseling set up for pupils who are members of cultural minorities and immigrants, as well as for people who live and work with them. The final part of the paper defines the intercultural competence of a school counselor. The latter should be able to detect cultural aspects relating to the counselee, to recognise their role in the causing of the problem of the person seeking counsel and its solution. He/she should be able to incorporate them in the counseling situation and process.

#### *Sažetak*

U prvom dijelu rada utvrđuje da u sadašnjosti pitanje suradnje između pripadnika većine i pripadnika različitih manjinskih kulturalnih, religijskih, društvenih i dr. je najvažnije civilizacijsko pitanje. Kao posljedica, interkulturalna pedagogija i interkulturalno obrazovanje imaju najvažniju ulogu. Zbog takvih multikulturalnih uvjeta, školsko savjetovanje je također razvilo neke posebnosti. Nadalje, u radu autorica definira i predstavlja karakteristike interkulturalnog savjetovanja za učenike koji su pripadnici manjina ili imigranti, kao i za osobe koje žive i rade s njima. Završni dio rada definira interkulturalne kompetencije školskog savjetnika. Nadalje, trebalo bi uočiti kulturalne aspekte savjetovanja, prepoznati njihovu ulogu, problem osobe koja traži savjetovanje i rješenje problema. On/ona bi se trebali moći uživjeti u situaciju za koju daje savjet, te u sam proces.

#### **Introduction**

*If you want to be my friend  
Forget I'm black  
If you want to be my friend  
Never forget I'm black /1/*

In today's globalised world, racial, cultural and other types of differentness or diversity have become more and more present in everyday life, which has rendered discussions on multiculturalism/interculturalism /2/ of vital importance. Namely, cultural differences have become a problem loaded with conflict.

Socio-cultural communities or minorities emerge:

- *through migration* (in 1999 the statistical data /3/,/4/ estimated that more than 2 % of the world population lived outside their native land) and

- *within a certain social and cultural milieu of a new community*. Since the society and culture constantly evolve, new communities develop within a particular social and cultural milieu. The strongest promoter of social stratification, and the forming of new sets of values, systems, social communities and cultures today is market production and its values, connected into a so-called "management culture" /5/. The classical family, sexual and religious stratifications have been replaced by an economic stratification. Alongside this the social activities in the recent years have encouraged the emergence of a number of marginal social groups (e.g. feminists, homosexuals, transvestites,), which have long been segregated, and are now fighting for recognition. The social and cultural differentiation resulting from the market logic

leads to exclusion /6/, while competitiveness leads to supremacy of one culture over another. All the above mentioned is more than reason for making the question of intercultural pedagogy a burning issue.

## 1 The definition of intercultural pedagogy

Intercultural pedagogy is a pedagogical discipline characterized /7/ by:

- the fact that world countries are becoming increasingly multicultural,
- the fact that after World War II a norm was adopted (defined in numerous international documents on human rights) claiming that members of minority ethnic groups in a certain country have certain common and individual rights, and
- the recognition that the school grades of the children who are members of ethnic minorities are poorer than those of the children belonging to the ethnic and cultural majority.

Intercultural pedagogy did not develop its own integral pedagogical paradigm, but rather belongs to the group of pedagogies, which respond to social problems and are paradigmatically linked to socio-critical pedagogy (problem of equal opportunities and social cohesion). Skubic Ermenc /8/ mentions two interrelated goals of intercultural pedagogy, namely:

1. To identify the conditions which would enable the realization of equal opportunities in education also for members of minority cultures in a given society (social integration).
2. To define the conditions enabling the entire school population to prepare for life in a multicultural society, that is on the basis of intercultural acceptance, of understanding and creative collaboration (social cohesion).

The official standpoint of Europe is (the basic document for the introduction of interculturalism in education was adopted in Dublin in 1983) that interculturalism brings a new quality into the lives of Europeans. To be a member of a minority should thus not be considered a deficiency, but rather diversity – a different quality. Working with children should not be characterized by paternalism and extraction from one's own culture, but rather by accounting for and acknowledging the differences among people and offering additional help leading to success and not to stigmatization. Interculturalism is linked to demands for abandoning europocentrism and any form of discrimination. The goal of intercultural pedagogy is to learn to live and function in diversity. Zidarić /9/ mentions the following priority fields of European intercultural pedagogy:

### Mother tongue

All minorities (autochthonous or allochthonous) have a right to preserve their mother tongue, which is why the European intercultural policy has always put forward the demand that classes in the mother tongue of minorities should always be included in the school curriculum. These classes should not be marginalized but should have high standards.

### Maintaining one's identity

Learning the mother tongue and getting to know one's culture better form a basis in European intercultural pedagogy enabling the minorities to maintain their identity.

### The importance of teacher education

Intercultural pedagogy stresses the importance of educating teachers for the needs of intercultural education. Teachers should become familiar with the theory; they should be capable of sociological analysis and prepared to reflect on their potential prejudices and discriminatory practice. They should accept interculturalism as a value.

### The importance of intercultural curricula, contents and textbooks

Intercultural pedagogy deals with the formation of intercultural curricula and materials. At the same time it is involved in the analysis of other school subjects and textbooks. It strives towards eliminating eurocentricity and toward loosening the duality at the level between the national and the international, namely between "us" and the "others".

### The development of interculturalism as a pedagogical principle

In order to make the two goals happen (namely an equally successful life for the minority and majority and the capacity to live a peaceful and creative life in a multicultural society) it is not enough to add some subjects and contents to the curriculum, while the school itself remains ethnocentric. As holds for any pedagogical principle, interculturalism too should become steeped in all possible and relevant fields and levels of upbringing and education. Alongside this, each school with at least one minority member should strive to integrate them in the life and functioning of the school and not assimilate them. Such a pupil thus has the right to maintain and also outwardly manifest his/her national and language identity.

### Expanding the idea of interculturalism across the entire population

The most essential task of intercultural pedagogy is to spread the idea of interculturalism across the

entire population. This is in accordance with the values of the democratic world, the functioning of which is based on human rights. This will enable a peaceful existence not only of the minorities but of all humanity in a world where the mixing of different cultures is on the increase due to processes of globalization.

#### Minority aid

The spreading of attention toward and ideas of intercultural pedagogy across the entire population, however, does not mean that minorities need no longer be dealt with. On the contrary, they should receive aid in the realization of specific needs, or there will be no success.

In all the above mentioned, the **school plays an important role**. In the following, only a part of interculturality in the school environment will be dealt with, namely **intercultural counseling**. The task of school counseling is adjusting the child's origin with the social intentions of education. It is thus the case of helping the pupils to learn about adjusting, but not at the price of losing their identity of self-image.

## 2 Intercultural counseling

*"I was coming to school feeling wound up like a spring...they tripped me up, called me 'black this' and 'black that' and when was I going to back to the jungle ... I got into trouble as soon as I got into class because X made a comment and I exploded. I tried to explain to my form tutor but her eyes glazed over and I knew she wasn't listening. She just told me whatever had happened was no excuse."*

(James, a twelve-year old boy of African descent)

The experience of young James /10/ at school is only one of a number of sad stories of children who are neglected and segregated due to their being different (racially, culturally...). However, such stories also show how important intercultural education is. Namely, at school level, intercultural education means forming such a school community in which the religious, racial, social and cultural origin of the pupils, teachers and others should not be the reason for segregation. It is a matter of forming an environment in which pupils, members of national minorities, should not be pressured to renounce their national identity and blend into the culture of the majority. From the point of view of the individual or the cultural minority this thus means the forming of a less restrictive and for the

individual more acceptable school environment adjusted to this individual.

The school environment should be organized in such a manner that the transition of the child from the family and its cultural environment to school should represent a logical (non-aggressive) expanding of the child's social environment and his/her development. Here, a major role is played also by the **school counselor**. Counseling is necessary for the pupils at their internal (intrapersonal) level to develop their cultural identity which will be the backbone of their intimate life, and to develop the ability to empathize with the culture of others, to feel the cultural diversity. Numerous authors dealing with counseling have stressed the importance of cultural factors in counseling /11/.

The counselor should be able to reduce the unfavorable influence of the pupil's differentness – the cultural, religious, racial... and at the same time prevent the ethical and cultural differences from becoming the cause for various difficulties in the school environment and the psychosocial field of the individual. Resman /12/ notes that in the framework of school counseling the question of intercultural education can be dealt with in terms of two relations:

- the interpersonal relation, that is the relationship of the minority child/pupil toward the school, the school work, the curriculum, toward the teacher, other pupils, the parents and others;
- the intrapersonal (internal) level, that is from the viewpoint of forming his/her points of view, convictions, actions.

Both relations form the child's ethnic identity and intercultural perspective.

Pedersen and Ivey /13/, who speak of "counseling geared toward the culture" (culture centered counseling) claim that to a certain extent any counseling is intercultural. The counselor and the counselee are determined by aspects of the culture they originate from. According to the mentioned authors, culture is not treated as a specific factor of the counseling, but as the heart and soul of individually the counselor and the counselee as well as all the remaining counseling relationships.

According to Sue /14/ the main specific features of intercultural counseling are:

- Cultural identity is an important determinant influencing the person's opinion of himself/herself and his/her opinion of others, which is why the level of cultural identity will have impact on how the counselor and the counselee will define the latter's problem and on how the counseling will take place.

- Intercultural counseling will be most effective the more the counselor employs forms and methods of counseling in such a manner that they are in accordance with the values of the counselee.
- The counselor should be aware of the fact that his/her identity as well as that of the counselee will be formed on the basis of numerous experiences in the life of the individual, and on the basis of the interdependence of individual, family and cultural factors.
- Alongside individual counseling the network of other intercultural interventional and preventive systems is also important in intercultural counseling.
- The main goal of intercultural counseling is the "release of the consciousness". In the western parts of the world the goal of counseling was to help people on their way to selfrealization. In intercultural counseling, however, it is more important to expand the personal, family, group and organizational consciousness.
- Intercultural counseling is a metatheory of counseling. It is a theory of theories, which provides tools for the understanding of numerous present-day established approaches. It emphasizes that there are neither wrong or right approaches nor good or bad ones. It is, however, necessary to be familiar with all of them in order to apply the most appropriate one in a specific situation. Greater awareness of the theoretical and practical approaches enables the counselor to adjust his/her counseling to the needs of each individual counselee.
- Cultural knowledge (the counselor has knowledge of the culture of the counselee which he/she can link with other pieces of information he/she possesses;
- Cultural empathy (the counselor can observe the situation from the perspective of the counselee's culture);
- Cultural insight (the counselor can test and evaluate whether the process of counseling is in accordance with the counselee's cultural world).

The importance of intercultural knowledge and skills is mentioned also by other authors /16/ who stress that intercultural competencies are an essential part of the counselor's professional attitude. Intercultural competencies can be defined as a system of viewpoints, knowledge, skills and abilities necessary when dealing with counsees coming from different cultural environments as well as with other people (e.g. parents, teachers...) and institutions who are faced with the problem of intercultural.

Presently, the most accepted and best-defined intercultural competencies are those (it is the case of a list in the form of a matrices 3x3) which was in 1991/92 published by the Committee of the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development in the framework of the American Counseling Association. /17/. In order to do effective intercultural counseling, a school counselor should develop *conviction*, *knowledge* and *skills* at three levels:

*The levels of awareness of ones own culture and cultural values.*

The school counselor should accept and respect racial, ethnic, cultural and value differences between himself/herself and the pupil. He/she should possess specific knowledge of his/her own cultural and ethnic heritage, and be aware of how these as well as other forms of repression, discrimination... have an impact on him/her personally and on his/her definition of the notions normal-abnormal and on the process of counseling itself.

Alongside this, the counselor should take part in continuing education, seminars and training in the field of interculturality thus improving and enriching his/her intercultural knowledge. It is also important that counselors are capable of recognizing the limits to their competence and should consult their colleagues when in doubt.

The level of awareness of the pupil's (counselee's) culture and of his/her world view

The individual and characteristic features of intercultural counseling described in this section demand of the counselor so-called intercultural counseled competencies which will be dealt with in the final part of this paper.

## 2.1 Intercultural counseling competencies

Tseng in Strelzer /15/ claim that an intercultural competent counselor is capable of understanding and dealing with the counselee's problem in the context of the culture from which the counselee originates. It is important that the counselor should strive to form a relaxed relationship with the counselee with a sense of acceptedness, since the latter had already gone through a number of unpleasant situations. The authors give a list of the qualities of an intercultural competent counselor, namely:

- Cultural sensitivity (the counselor is sensitive and respectful toward different convictions, actions and is aware of cultural differences);

At this level the counselor should be aware of his/her potential negative reactions to other cultural and ethnic groups, which could have impact on his/her relationship toward the pupil from a different cultural surrounding. In his/her relationship toward such a pupil he/she should try to express and confront his/her convictions, however, without accusations and judgment.

The counselor should be familiar with the culture of the children he/she works with, with their cultural heritage, experience, their past and the influence of the latter on the development of their identity. He/she should know that the problems (e.g. discrimination, poverty, racism) such children face can leave consequences which can influence the process of counseling.

He/she should follow research and the most recent discoveries in the field of mental health of minorities and migrants and should participate in additional training. It is extremely important that he/she should meet with the pupils also outside school (e.g. visits them at home...), thus getting to know the pupils' way of life and the situation in which they live.

*At the level of applying culturally adequate strategies, forms and methods.*

The counselor should be familiar with the process of development of cultural identity and with the terminology in the field of interculturality. He/she should take into consideration strategies, methods and forms of aid which the pupils are familiar with from their native country. One of the greatest problems of the pupil's adjustment to his/her new environment is the language, which is why it is important that the counselor accepts the pupil's bilingualism and does not consider it an obstacle. If it is possible, the counselor should give counsel in the language the pupil speaks.

The counselor should strive to function in such a manner as to subdue the problems of elitism, repression, racism, etc. and in the case of pupils, teachers and parents to enhance sensitivity toward these phenomena. Alongside all this the counselor should guide the pupil in the process of counseling: to inform him/her about the process itself, the goals, expectations, limits and rights.

The counselor should be fully familiar with various instruments, strategies, tests through which he/she accounts for the pupil's cultural characteristics. He/she should also be acquainted with the structure of the pupil's family, the hierarchy and roles in the family, and the values and religious orientation of the family.

## Conclusion

The paper deals with intercultural pedagogy and the argument that as far as the attitude of the society toward cultural, religious, social and other minorities is concerned the question of intercultural education is quite a burning issue in the present world. Schools present an arena of a variety of cultures. Children of different behavioral orientations, styles and value systems are gathered here. This cultural plurality has gained increasing attention from the side of school counselors and is presenting them new challenges – personal as well as pedagogical. In order to be able to handle them, counselors should acquire cultural competencies. Alongside this they should through intercultural counseling enhance the sensitivity of all (pupils, teachers and parents...) to cultural diversity, and contribute to the striving that an atmosphere of tolerance, coexistence and equality govern in society.

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