Educational Strategies to Promote Cultural Diversity

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the specific applicative dimension, the coordinates of affirmation of cultural diversity in the educational space and the affirmation of cultural diversity as a shade of "difference" that generates value capital for the society. This dimension is a challenge which requires simultaneous assurance of respect for cultural differences, their recognition, and equality of opportunity. The problem treated by the paper sustains educational mission, in agreement with the new organization system of society, in new dimensions of asserting cultural pluralism.

Keywords: cultural diversity; academic, intercultural competence; cultural identity; equality of opportunity.

1. Problem Statement

In Romania there is an expansion of the concept of cultural diversity, a social fact and reference value in shaping the mental infrastructure of society. The "cultural diversity" in terms of discursive, normative and action plan is built as a specific dimension of global-local continuum. In a society where cultural diversity is still determined by differences in social and professional status, where there are remnants of marginalization or exclusion from the social act, where teachers still struggle with their own prejudices and disadvantaged groups are an obstacle in the way of school results and educational policy provisions have not found solutions for sensitive social issues, we need to raise the question whether cultural diversity is a disadvantage or an advantage for an individual in his/her evolution and whether it gives him, in public life, an equal chance and a privileged status.

Local perspective of cultural space of historical Maramures provides examples and explanations of the particular typs of hypostasis mechanisms associated with the dimension of "ethnicity", giving it a certain
coherence and intensity of demonstrations. Cultural diversity in this region is not only a fact; it is a major social concern in the public agenda in terms of priorities.

2. Purpose of Study
The motivation for this research proposal is based on equality of opportunity and, at the same time, on respect for cultural differences, the necessary intercultural literacy of learners who need to understand the experiences of ethnic and cultural groups from the society, to reflect upon these both positive and negative experiences which build the social public life.

This study is based on a tangible application dimension, too, on rethinking of educational strategies to promote cultural diversity in Romania, in a post-modern society where intercultural initiation is a phenomenon that influences through its actions the modernization of a global society, whose goal is the safety of citizens and sustainability. (Heyward, M., 2002). Historical Maramures is the context for which we opted with the intention to check the reality of "cultural diversity" in order to identify a number of factors that determine the variation of events and the meanings of “local” influences in the affirmation of cultural diversity in the educational space.

3. Research Methods
The educational strategy is built at the intersection of the social, economic and cultural, in a more complex analytical context and supported by a set of interests that generate metamorphosis in the social system, but also in educational efforts under the influence of local-global duality…which represents the basis of human (cultural) society development (Cucoș, C.; Popa, N. L., 2009, pp. 34). In this context, historical Maramures is dominated by a real structural mechanism of evolution, a dynamic rhythm in discursive – applicative or theory-practice relations. This has been an exercise in local educational policy, where we have found the distinction between concepts of “old democracy” and “new democracy”, based on the triad of cultural diversity, education and integration, as a necessity of building dialogue between different traditions which enrich the cultural heritage of the participants and facilitate optimal integration of the beneficiaries in the educational process. This process allows valuing diversity through professional training methods and practices.

The main purpose of the research was to analyze educational strategies that help to promote training "for and by" a diversity of beneficiaries, in a formal and non-formal framework, due to the interconnections established between intercultural education and lifelong learning. This approach has involved teachers, students and educational partners, as well as parents.

Research objectives:
1. Radiography of factors that determine reactions to cultural diversity.
2. Identifying strategies for achieving education for cultural diversity.
3. Highlighting the possible solutions advanced by teachers in order to overcome the impasse regarding the relative nature of cultures and reviving local identity as a reaction to globalization.

Investigation took into account the training level of teachers from secondary education with regard to the way of managing educational strategies for promoting cultural diversity in a polymorphic, dynamic, complex reality and a more impregnated one by emphasizing the differences, which in some contexts become difficult to manage, by adopting pluralistic treatment strategies for cultural diversity and, at the same time, by adapting educational institutions to the needs of beneficiaries and by treating students as individuals rather than representatives of social groups, thus optimizing the school-student-parent relations.

General hypothesis:
The condition of minority/majority, the frequency of intercultural contacts, social and professional status determine the reaction to cultural diversity.
Related research also aimed at a radiography of the existing situation at the level of educational reality in what concerns the promotion of cultural diversity, recognition of the values, ways of life in which individuals and society report in their interaction, but also the promotion of the solutions provided in order to revive local identity, which implies as scientific approach specific methodological issues, aimed at supporting the relevance of undertaken actions. For the investigative approach there were imposed with a great rigor deployment of target population sampling operation envisaged in the undertaken research. The investigated lot consisted of 50 subjects, based on simple random sampling procedure, teachers in undergraduate education: teachers teaching at preschool level (15 subjects), primary level (16 subjects), gymnasium (19 subjects) - direct actors of educational action. We mention that these teachers were from four institutions and their related structures with an ethnic and cultural diversity of school population, with an educational action centred on forming the bicultural competence and some efficient systems of interpersonal interethnic and intercultural interactions.

In agreement with the settled objectives we have established methods and working tools that ensure sustainability of observant research and, in the context of the limited available time given to subjects to respond to requests in written questionnaire-based survey (invoking the lack of time needed to complete the questionnaires) - also led us to apply another method of investigation, the semi-standardized interview.

Through the interview-based survey research method were investigated the opinions of the subjects who prefer to answer directly to questions, which aimed the approach of cultural diversity in education, but also questions based on responses to standard questions from one case to other. The questionnaire applied to teachers objectified in 24 items, which in terms of content have assumed expressing an opinion, based on the reflection on the approach of cultural diversity in educational space and in which concerns the recording format of the responses were several items with predominantly open character.

We considered that it was important for subjects to express personal opinion in light of teaching experience without suggesting them potential responses, aiming at the way of influencing various aspects that have a major impact in promoting cultural diversity and remediation of disadvantages of cultural/ethnic and socioeconomic disadvantaged groups that target the removal of inequalities by supporting academic progress. In the experimental research, research tools and methods used in data collection were taken into account, of which analysis would verify the hypothesis and provide pertinent answers on the topic researched, but also the method of research curriculum documents and other school documents, aiming at measuring the results from a quantitative and qualitative perspective.

4. Findings and Results

By reference to the information obtained from respondents were outlined the results, which were the basis of the research findings. From this perspective, the objective set in the investigation has been achieved outlining the quantitative and qualitative patterns derived from educational activities designed to promote cultural diversity, which offers students the necessary opportunities to study in languages of different ethnic groups, leading to the construction of communication systems that contribute to forming bicultural competence. The research objectives were correlated with the general hypothesis. This was confirmed ensuring coherence and validity of the undertaken study. In case of responders no significant differences were registered at the level of willingness to respond, satisfaction to respond and consent, which demonstrates that social and professional status does not influence the reaction to cultural diversity. Reporting teachers to a set of values that include social relational system, the relation of tolerance and compatibility of values, demonstrates an overall balance between the existing local and ethnic value system, which led to a mutual enrichment and the formation of bicultural competence. This relationship shows that there are more similarities than differences in the level of appreciating teachers (S. Mahmud, 2009), who, in their daily activity, suggested curricular adaptations, major changes at the level of social structures and mechanism generating inequality, stereotypes, prejudices and social distancing.
A percentage of 82% of respondents sustained that for them frequent/constant intercultural contacts represent a factor which determines a more favourable reaction in relation to cultural diversity than for subjects whose intercultural contacts are rare/occasional (18%). Also, 90% of respondents indicated that the frequency of interactions with members of other cultures (Hungarian, Ukrainian, gypsy) is another factor that sets a much wider opening to the values of the various cultural groups that support the individual's personal lifestyle favouring self-perception of personal development; 56% of teachers claimed that the most important factor is dissatisfaction towards the present state, which has left its mark on the social economy and on the system of relationships at the community level. The same percentage also highlights formal social relationships, actions taken, which in many cases have generated conflicts between cultural groups and which, through a coherent and efficient institutional management, led to coherence, changing values and norms of behaviour supported by the group. Also, a percentage of 43% of respondents supported the need to reduce intolerant and discriminatory attitudes towards cultural/ethnic or socioeconomic disadvantaged groups and strengthening the beneficial effects of cultural diversity.

Answers given by respondents in written questionnaire-based survey and interview-based survey provided data and information about the complete and complex mechanism of designing and implementing educational strategies to promote cultural diversity: a percentage of 68% promote integrative training type, and in the educational approach there is a need of methodological openness, the promotion of active and interactive methods by which learner becomes a co-participant in his own training and education and knowledge; 85% of respondents in the didactic activity use playful action demarches to stimulate, which help learners to form the skills needed for interpersonal intercultural interactions and also personal experimentation in a safe environment of topics from daily reality; the same percentage resort in educational activities to methods like reflection exercises, discussions, projects, portfolios, accessing of audiovisual and electronic documentation sources for understanding cultural/ethnic experiences of society but also for the formation of values, attitudes and behaviours to support cultural diversity and ethnic pluralism; 78% of teachers are concerned with the developing of educational strategies to promote cultural diversity as hypostasis of "difference" that generates capital value, which imposes an increase in the frequency and intensity of concerns from the Romanian educational policies space oriented on authentic management of diverse cultural potential, redefinition of current concerns, the mission of education. A percentage of 84% of responders are concerned about building an optimum strategy for training the learners for intercultural, strategy that has steps like observation, living some concrete situations of daily life, understanding it, and as a superior step the possibility of managing by students some concrete situations from community.

A percentage of 76% of teachers claimed that a possible solution would be openness toward the existing cultural groups increasing cultural sensitivity with implications in terms of personal development and also by intensifying networking between members of different cultures by directing increasing acceptance of diversity, representing individual experiences in the area crossed by the educational environment. This is shown by the percentage of 66% of respondents who advanced as a solution the need to build a multicultural school, where not only the curriculum needs to be changed, but it requires continuous training of teachers in this direction, diversifying teaching strategies and a consistent and appropriate institutional management educational beneficiaries.

According to the literature, the local socio-cultural reality and training needs of public school, 90% claimed solutions of the educational approach the acquisition of intercultural competence by the educational beneficiary, which is not innate, proof: intercultural relations were proven throughout history to be accompanied by tension, oppression, individual and collective suffering (Bennett, M., 1993, quoted by Butnar, S., 2009, pp. 579), but also the need of development of a set of specific moral values in structural and cultural sense of a pluralistic society. Also, a percentage of 76% of interviewers consider a solution for constructing of multicultural identity and reviving the local identity as reaction to globalization the intensification and diversification of training programs in agreement with international standards. Through the responses of these subjects it was confirmed that, through
continuous training programs they would develop their cultural style involved in teaching and learning, acquiring the resources necessary to understand some peculiarities of ethnicity manifestation: social values, intercultural communication features, methods of valuing knowledge or orientation in time and space.

Through interview-based survey we consider that the information obtained was a real support to improve initial and continuing training activities for teachers in order to promote cultural diversity and the development of traits, abilities, skills necessary for optimal and effective management of intercultural relations. It was noted that the development of such training programs, as well as advice regarding education for diversity still has a poor shape, as there is no coherent offer. The answers given by the respondents had in common their wishes to participate in training programs, which would follow the applicative side of counselling activities and as well as the methodological creativity development of educators. Respondents suggested ways by which to contribute to professional development in teaching. Such a way is exchanging experience with other teachers involved in the complex mechanism of education for cultural diversity. This type of professional relationship even allows the development of a mentoring system, which would bring extra benefits on the dimension of the interaction management, orientation to knowledge, tolerance to ambiguity, manifestation of respect or the quality of interaction with the others.

Another issue discussed was a new multicultural curriculum, were it had been suggested the inclusion of an ongoing study about cultures, historical experiences of ethnic and cultural groups that exist locally, but also the new curriculum to include comparative approaches to the study of cultural diversity, which would help learners to form a set of tools that would allow them interpretation of events, conflicts from different cultural and ethnic perspective, to help students to develop decision-making competence, participation in social management with political efficiency feeling, “bases necessary for effective citizenship in a democratic pluralistic nation” (Butnar, S., 2009, pp. 578). All these advanced solutions represent a relevant aspect in professional development, but also in building a career in promoting the educational strategies in affirmation of cultural diversity.

5. Conclusions

At the level of education for cultural diversity, we support the awareness of decision makers in designing and implementing educational strategies to customize approaches to promote cultural diversity in specific institutional context, facilitating positive interactions. It is necessary to give a practical expert system and a line of research and publication in the development of educational strategies for promoting cultural diversity, accessible to all teachers through a proper database by publishing articles, magazines, books. All these goals lead to starting a national and international cooperation, a cooperation founded by cultural, economic, social, organizational implication of the decision makers, who contribute to decrease of ethnocentrism and the increase of ethno-relativism.

Diagnostic study obtained allowed teacher to know the directions of action necessary to transform schools into appropriate educational environment for ethnic and cultural diversity, but also opens up dialogue in the political sphere of society to rethink legislative framework coordinates, that will indicate a more conclusive mechanisms that generates deep changes in a pluralistic society in terms of structure and ethnicity.

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