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Intercultural Education – Tensions and Prospects Case Study – The Approach of the 1st-year Students from the Pedagogy of Primary and Pre-school Education

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Abstract

The contemporary trend of the globalization does not cancel the cultural differences among the various human entities: states, nations, individuals. It currently constitutes the economic, financial, political frame, able to facilitate interactions and connections. Under these circumstances intercultural education represents a opportunity. Our study aims at identifying the way in which 1st-year students from the Pedagogy of Primary and Pre-School Education, from "Petrol-Gaze" University of Ploieşti and "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, understand this type of education and its place in the context of their training. Finally, we propose several themes and lines for approaching this education's objectives and principles.

1. Intercultural education (IE) – need, chance, hope

Compared to the end of the 20th century, the beginning of this millennium has brought numerous challenging. The economic, political, ecological, climatic and ideological transformations have exceeded national/regional borders. The world is infested with clashes between individuals, groups and peoples that feel, think and act

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differently. At the same time, these individuals, groups and nations are also challenged by shared problems that demand cooperation in order to be solved (Hofstede, Hofstede, Minkov, 2012). Thus, to deal with the threats of nuclear wars, global warming, organized crime, poverty, world calamities such as AIDS, cancer, obesity, or global recession, there is the need for understanding, dialogue, openness. The growingly alarming signals since the 70s have drawn attention to the imperative of changing the attitude of humankind in relation to becoming – edifying a proactive attitude and, above all, "developing the human by cultivating its humanity, dignity and responsibility" (Cojocariu, 2003, p. 17). At the same time and within the same complex and multidimensional process encompassing the geopolitical upheavals of the last decades, spectacular and unpredictable, the expansion and fathoming of the process of European integration, the intensification of globalization and the revolution in the field of the new communication technologies, as well as other changes that have rolled down like in an avalanche, all these demand the amplification of intercultural dialogue and interactions between individuals and groups belonging to different cultural environments (Georgiu, 2010). More and more people are forced to face diverse socio-cultural realities, having the possibility to work in ethnically and culturally heterogeneous companies. These experiences have raised the issue of "acquiring new social relating skills and abilities, adaptation and understanding of cultural differences" (Georgiu, 2010, p. 9). Or, for all these and for participation to a peaceful, productive and self-fulfilling life, IE is timely and useful.

Taking into account these economic, social, ideological coordinates, intercultural management (Hofstede, Hofstede, Minkov, 2012; Zaiţ, 2002), intercultural psychology (Gavreliuc, 2006), intercultural communication (Georgiu, 2010, Şerbănescu, 2007, Tonoiu, 2005), intercultural learning and education (Băran-Pescaru, 2008; Nedelcu, 2008, 2004; Cucoş, 2000; Dasen, Perregaux, Rey, 1999) respond to an enhanced concern for "understanding the world's cultural diversity", an essential imperative of the educational process, namely, that "of training and forming people able to communicate and interact in much more complex life contexts, where social actors with varied cultural identities meet and interact" (Georgiu, 2010, 9). Whether young or less young, people have to learn the "cultural codes characteristic of their new interlocutors, who often hold different beliefs, values and attitudes with regard to fundamental life issues" (idem, 10).

2. Intercultural education (IE) and initial training for the teaching career

At this conjuncture, the involvement of the school is imminent. For this, it needs open-minded teachers, able to understand, facilitate and practice IE. Therefore, it is necessary that teachers themselves display an intercultural mood, in order to manifest intercultural convictions, attitudes, responses and behaviours and so that delicately guide students towards such convictions, attitudes, responses and behaviours. Currently, in terms of ideology, the curriculum that establishes the initial training of teachers for primary and pre-school education has no such foundation. It is neither conceived – and therefore – nor built on an intercultural foundation, but rather on one of cognitive neutrality and a methodological-instructive mechanism meant to stimulate school learning. Within such an ideology, the concern for intercultural openness is, extremely pale (Cucoş, 2000). The elaboration of the official initial training programme for teachers for primary and pre-school education reveals more of a preoccupation for interaction with an ideal school reality, equally general and vague, without any aims correlated with the challenges of these times. Its conceivers are deluded by the fact that the graduates "will work with students belonging to the majority of the population, highly motivated children, eager to achieve high performances and coming from middle-class, biparental families" (Irvine, 1990, apud Nedelcu, 2008, p. 147).

It is, we believe, high time we seriously considered this important aspect of contemporary education and a fundamental reorganization of the initial training of prospective teachers in general and of pre-school and primary education teachers in particular. Thus, they would be trained to foresee and avoid the tendency towards closure (their own and, consequently, that of their students) inside an exclusively ethnocentric and arrogant view, as well as the tendency towards easy, frivolous, mimetic acceptance of a cosmopolite, levelling, depersonalizing view. For this, a thorough and profound intercultural initiation is not just inherent, but also beneficial.

3. Research methodology

The study was conducted from March to May 2015, on a group of 100 1st-year students from the study

programme of the Pedagogy of Primary and Pre-School Education, from two Romanian public universities, "Petrol şi Gaze" University of Ploieşti, respectively "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău. The group of respondents was systematized based on 2 criteria (the university attended by the students – UPG: "Petrol şi Gaze" University of Ploieşti, respectively UVAB: "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău – and their status on the job market, namely employed/ non-employed in education).

Table 1. The structure of the experimental group

Subjects	Number		Percentage	
	UPG	UVAB	UPG	UVAB
Employed in education	15	23	15%	23%
Non-employed in education	41	21	41%	21%
Total	**56**	**44**	**56%**	**44%**
	100		**100%**	

The data collection was achieved by means of a questionnaire with 6 close-ended questions. For each item, the students were required to select only one answer alternative from the available ones. To quantify and systematize the results, one point was scored for each selected answer.

The aim of our research is represented by identifying the students' opinion regarding the purpose of intercultural education (IE), as well as its relevance and impact upon the formation of human personality.

The general research hypothesis: Is there an accurately and coherently structured pedagogical perspective regarding the purpose, relevance and formative impact of intercultural education (IE)?

The specific hypothesis: Are there any relevant differences regarding the purpose, relevance and formative impact of intercultural education (IE) highlighted by students working in education compared to those not working in education?

The research objectives and their correlation with the items from the questionnaire (I1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6) are:
O1 – correct identification of the purpose of IE (I 2); O2 – establishing the relevance of IE in relation to other species of the new educations (I1); O3 – identification of the nucleus of values relevant for the formative impact of IE (I 3, 4, 5, 6); O4 – comparative analysis of the two perspectives for approaching the issue of IE (the students with no teaching experience versus the students with teaching experience)

4. Study results and their analysis

To achieve O1, the subjects had to answer the following items: I2 In your opinion, intercultural education aims at … (7 possible answers). The table below presents the systematization of the obtained data:

Table 2. The students' opinion regarding the purpose of intercultural education*

	a.	b.	c.	d.	e.	f.	g.	Total
UPG non-employed	3	3	3	7	**19**	1	5	41
employed	2	1	1	2	**7**	0	2	15
UVA non-employed	2	3	0	1	**13**	0	2	21
employed	2	2	3	5	**9**	0	2	23
TOTAL	9	9	7	15	**48**	1	11	**100**
%	9%	9%	7%	15%	**48%**	1%	11%	**100%**

* a. Knowledge of the great cultures of humanity; b. Knowledge of the history of world culture; c. Discouragement of possible conflicts among different human groups; d. Facilitating dialogue among people; e. Knowledge of the customs, traditions, rituals of different cultures; f. Blotting the cultural identity of groups of people; g. Building a global culture.

The data collected on how the purpose of IE is understood highlights a considerable convergence of the students' opinions regarding the acceptance, by almost half of the group (48%) of *possible answer e*. These students correctly identify the purpose of IE with the action of knowing of different cultures. The other six meanings are hierarchized, with relevant differences, as follows (see Table 2): d, facilitating dialogue among people (15%); g, building a global culture (11%); a, knowledge of the great cultures of humanity and b, knowledge of the history of world culture, with equal scores (9%); c, discouragement of possible conflicts among different human groups (7%) and f, blotting the cultural identity of groups of people (1%). It is hopeful the fact that only one student erroneously conceived the purpose of IE. All the other options, closely connected to IE, are relevant in this respect, but rather from their hypostasis of effects, results rather than as purposes.

In terms of specific hypothesis, we found that there are no differences in how the two categories of students from the structure of the group appreciate the purpose of IE. Most of the non-employed (32%) and employed (16%) students from the two universities indicate the same purpose, namely that of knowing the customs, traditions and rituals of different cultures.

To achieve O2, the subjects had to answer the following item: I1 In your opinion, in current school, it is relevant to build and improve at young generations, in order of relevance … (4 answer possibilities). Table 3 shows the systematization of the data obtained in this respect:

Table 3. The position given to intercultural education *

	a.	b.	c.	d.	Total
UPG non-employed	21	10	**8**	2	41
employed	6	2	**6**	1	15
UVA non-employed	11	5	**4**	1	21
employed	12	1	**8**	2	23
TOTAL					
non-employed	32	15	**12**	3	62
employed	18	3	**14**	3	38
%	50%	18%	**26%**	6%	100%

*a. I. Education for health; II. Ecological education; III. Education in communication technologies; IV. Intercultural education; b. I. Education in communication technologies; II. Intercultural education; III. Education for health; IV. Ecological education; c. I. Intercultural education; II. Education for health; III. Ecological education; IV. Education in communication technologies; d. I. Ecological education; II. Education in communication technologies; III. Intercultural education; IV. Education for health.

The data collected regarding the position of IE reveals the fact that half of the respondents (50%) have selected *possible answer a*, placing education for health on top and IE on the last place, after education for health, ecological education, education in communication technologies. Hardly a quarter of the respondents give the top position to IE, selecting *possible answer c* (26%) and placing it on the first place in relation to the other three new educations mentioned. Quite close (18%) is *possible answer b*, where although the first place is given to education in communication technologies, IE is given the second position. Thus, we may deduce the fact that most subjects do not regard this type of education as a priority for their initial training.

In terms of the specific hypothesis, we have found that there are no differences in how the two categories of students from the group structure appreciate the place of IE within the set of the new educations. Most of the non-employed (32%) and employed (18%) students from the two universities indicate the same position of IE, namely the fourth place, after education for health, ecological education, education in communication technologies.

To achieve O3, the subjects had to answer items 3,4,5,6. For I3: In your opinion, intercultural training of young generations facilitates ….(6 possible answers), there were obtained the following data:

Table 4. The students' opinion about the values that support the formative impact of intercultural education in training young generations *

	a.	b.	c.	d.	e.	f.	Total
UPG non-employed	0	1	7	8	**18**	7	41
employed	0	0	3	3	**5**	4	15
UVA non-employed	0	2	6	2	**6**	5	21
employed	0	1	1	8	**12**	1	23
TOTAL	0	4	17	21	**41**	17	100
%	0%	4%	17%	21%	**41%**	17%	100%

* a. Trade; b. Tourism; c. The care of each individual towards his own traditions, customs, values; d. The care of each individual towards the traditions, customs and values of the other; e. Tolerance; f. The desire of each group of people to assert their culture.

The data collected regarding the values that support the formative impact of IE in training young generations highlights the presence of a relative consensus of the respondents. Hopefully, it was found that 41% of these (see Table 4) appreciate the value of tolerance as having a relevant impact upon young people. On the second position, with barely 21% of the options, there is appreciated the care of each individual for the traditions, customs and values of the other. With equal options (17%) there are two possible answers that indicate insufficient understanding of the essence of IE, respectively each individual's cherishing of his own traditions, customs and values (possible answer c) and the desire of each group of people to assert their culture (f). An extremely limited option (4%) is attributed to the formative impact of IE in developing tourism and the development of trade is excluded by all the respondents (0%).

In terms of the specific hypothesis, we have found that there are no differences related to how the two categories of students from the group structure appreciate the formative impact of IE in training young generations. Most of the non-employed (24%) and employed (17%) students from the two universities assert the most relevant formative role of the same value of intercultural education - tolerance.

For I4: In your opinion, intercultural education helps and will help us ….(4 possible answers), there were generated the following data:

Table 5. The students' opinion regarding the values that support the formative impact of intercultural education in interpersonal relationships *

	a.	b.	c.	d.	Total
UPG non-employed	3	**19**	**14**	5	41
employed	1	**7**	**5**	2	15
UVA non-employed	5	**5**	**9**	2	21
employed	1	**8**	**13**	1	23
TOTAL	10	**39**	**41**	10	100
%	10%	**39%**	**41%**	10%	100%

* a. Let us know ourselves better; b. Let us know others better; c. Let us identify what we share with others; d. Let us identify what distinguishes us from others.

The data collected regarding the values that support the formative impact of IE in interpersonal relationships highlight two closely related perspectives. We may notice, as shown in Table 5, that 41% of the respondents believe that the relevant value built by IE is the identification of the aspects shared with others, whereas an extremely close percentage, 39%, appreciate the greater role in knowing others better. With equal options (10%) there are two possible answers that indicate a diminution of the formative impact of IE, respectively only in the direction of self-knowledge (possible answer a) or of identifying the aspects that distinguish us from others

(possible answer d).

In terms of the specific hypothesis, we found that there are no differences in how the two categories of students from the group structure appreciate the formative impact of IE in building young generations. Most of the non-employed (23%, respectively 24%) and employed (18%, respectively 15%) students from the two universities assert, in an absolutely convergent manner, the most relevant formative role of the same values, the identification of the aspects shared with others, respectively knowing others better.

For I5: If I attended a course on intercultural education, I would be interested in ….(9 possible answers) there were obtained the following data:

Table 6. The formative aspects of intercultural education that may support the self-education effort*

	a.	b.	c.	d.	e.	f.	g.	h.	i.	Total
UPG non-employed	2	5	4	10	4	0	3	2	11	41
employed	3	5	1	2	0	1	1	1	1	15
UVA non-employed	1	1	3	6	1	1	2	1	5	21
employed	1	4	2	7	3	0	0	3	3	23
TOTAL	7	15	10	25	8	2	6	7	20	100
%	7%	15%	10%	25%	8%	2%	6%	7%	20%	100%

* a. European educational policies for encouraging the expansion of intercultural spirit; b. The usefulness and efficiency of intercultural education; c. The objectives and principles of intercultural education; d. Fathoming the world cultures; e. Better knowledge of Eastern culture, its origins and particularities; f. Better knowledge of Western culture, its origins and particularities; g. The study of values; h. The relation between national and European values; i. Blockages in intercultural dialogue.

The data collected regarding the formative aspects of IE that support the self-education effort highlight the fact that a quarter of the respondents (25%) appreciate its impact in fathoming knowledge about world cultures. Hopefully, as shown in Table 6, the second position, with 20% of the answers, is occupied by the motivation of diminishing blockages in intercultural dialogue. There follow, in descending order, the solutions that exploit the usefulness and efficiency of IE, 15% (possible answer b), the objectives and principles of IE, 10% (possible answer c) and possible answer e, the better knowledge of Eastern culture, with equal options, 8%. Very close to one another are two possible answers, a and h, namely European educational policies for encouraging the expansion of intercultural spirit, respectively the relation between national and European values. Unfortunately, on the last but one place, with 6%, there is the study of values, and on the last place, with 2%, the concern for a better knowledge of Western culture, its origins and particularities.

In terms of the specific hypothesis, we found that there are no differences in how the two categories of students from the group structure appreciate the formative impact of IE upon the self-education efforts. Most of the non-employed (16%) and employed (9%) students from the two universities assert, in an absolutely convergent manner, the fact that this refers to the fathoming of world cultures.

For I6: I believe that, eventually, intercultural education ….(7 possible answers), there were obtained the following data:

Table 7. The students' opinion regarding the formative impact of intercultural education in the evolution of their own personality *

	a.	b.	c.	d.	e.	f.	g.	Total
UPG non-employed	10	1	2	17	2	8	1	41
employed	1	0	0	10	2	2	0	15
UVA non-employed	2	0	0	15	0	4	0	21
employed	1	1	2	14	1	4	0	23
TOTAL	14	2	4	56	5	18	1	100
%	14%	2%	4%	56%	5%	18%	1%	100%

* a. Makes us more curious about the way of being of people from other cultures; b. Determines us to be more considerate about people from other cultures; c. Motivates us to express ourselves in the best possible way; d. Motivates us to open ourselves to people coming from other cultures; e. Gives us more confidence in people belonging to other cultures; f. Determines us to be more steadfast in promoting and cultivating our own culture; g. Determines us to be more considerate in promoting and cultivating our own culture.

The data collected regarding the values that highlight the opinion of students regarding the formative impact of IE upon the evolution of one's personality reveals the presence of a strong consensus among the respondents. According to Table 7, more than half of these (56%) appreciate the role of IE in enhancing personal motivation towards intercultural openness (towards people coming from other cultures) (*possible answer d*). On the second position, at a great difference, with barely 18% of the options, there is placed the amplification of steadfastness in promoting our own culture. With 14% of the answers, on the third position, there is situated the stimulation of curiosity regarding the way of being of people belonging to another culture. With extremely few options (5%, 4%, 2%, 1%) there are positioned the increased confidence in people belonging to other cultures (possible answer e); enhanced motivation in expressing ourselves in the best possible way (possible answer c); the determination to be more considerate towards people from other cultures (possible answer b), respectively the determination to be more considerate in promoting and cultivating our own culture (possible answer g).

In terms of the specific hypothesis, we found that there are no differences in how the two categories of students from the group structure appreciate the formative impact of IE upon the evolution of one's personality. Most of the non-employed (32%) and employed (24%) students from the two universities highlight the same impact vector - openness towards alterity. Analysing and synthesizing the answers to the last items, correlated with objective 3, we may argue that the relevant values regarding the formative impact of IE are: tolerance, openness and care towards people (belonging to other cultures), cooperation and colloquiality/ inter-knowledge.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Even though we live in a time of the intensification of contacts between institutions, groups and individuals belonging to different cultures it seems that "cultures do not mix" (Brooks, 2014). On the contrary, according to D. Brooks, "they seem to grow more and more individualized" (ibidem, p. 208). Each individual, each human group means also his/ its culture (where he/ they grew up and configured his/ their identity). The individual is dependent on a certain type of concepts and a certain way of perceiving reality, applying specific systems of symbolic significations (Geertz, 2014). "Culture provides the connection between what people are intrinsically able to become and what each of them actually becomes. To become a man means to become an individual and we become individuals under the guidance of cultural patterns, systems of signification historically created and according to which we give form, order, meaning and direction to our lives. And the cultural patterns involved are not general, but specific" (ibidem, p. 55). Therefore, nobody truly lives in a universality called culture. Each of us lives in specific cultures that differ more or less from one another. We may thus see how, in a time of the intensification of exchanges and interactions among people, there is the need for inter-knowledge, dialogue, (peaceful) understanding, cooperation and respect.

The designed, conducted and presented study generates the following topical findings:

a. The aim of our research (identifying the opinion of students regarding the purpose of IE, as well as its importance and impact in building human personality) has been reached.

b. There were gathered, presented and interpreted data that highlighted the three aspects, in agreement with the study objectives, that were reached, as follows: O1 – The purpose of IE has been identified with knowledge of the customs, traditions and rituals of different cultures by 48% of the responding students; O2 – In relation to other species of the new educations, 50% of the responding students barely situate it on the fourth position in a list including four other new educations (Education for health; II. Ecological education; III. Education in communication technologies; IV. Intercultural education); O3 – It was possible to identify a nucleus of values relevant for the formative impact of IE that include tolerance, openness and care for people (belonging to other cultures), cooperation and inter-knowledge; O4 – There was performed the comparative analysis of the two

perspectives for approaching the issue of IE (students with no teaching experience vs. students with teaching experience) and it was found that there are no differences in the orientation of their answers with regard to all the aspects investigated (purpose, relevance and formative impact of IE). With respect to each of the three issues covered (purpose, relevance and formative impact of IE) there was full consensus among the answers of the students without teaching experience and of those with teaching experience. Interestingly enough, most of the respondents from both categories of students asserted the same solution for each question.

c. On this basis, we hold relatively contradictory data to appreciate the validity of the general hypothesis. The data obtained for O1 and O3 found the existence of a pedagogical perspective structured accurately and coherently in terms of the purpose and formative impact of IE. Things are not the same for O2, where the relevance of IE is not asserted strongly enough. In this context, the general hypothesis is not validated.

d. The specific hypothesis was also not validated, given the fact that the data obtained do not indicate relevant differences regarding the purpose, relevance and formative impact of IE highlighted by the students who are working in education compared to those who are not working in teaching.

Our study draws attention to conceiving, on the new philosophical grounds (anthropological, axiological) of the initial training of the teaching staff (from primary and pre-school education). The data obtained reveals the fact that most subjects do not have yet a representation of the objectives, principles, usefulness and efficiency of IE. They are unprepared to approach an intercultural reality and build young generations for such a reality. For now (until the reorganization of the curriculum on the basis of interculturality), we propose, according to the interests of course attendants, the following optional alternatives: a. Intercultural communication (Georgiu, 2010; Lázár, 2005; Lázár et al., 2007); b. Intercultural psychology (Gavreliuc, 2006); c. Intercultural institutions and their mechanisms of optimal functioning (Hofstede, Hofstede, Minkov, 2012); d. Intercultural anthropology (Geertz, 2014); e. National culture and intercultural dialogue (Bernea, 2006, Papadima, 2009).

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