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# The introduction of cultural education in initial and continuous teacher training programmes in Romania. Operational perspectives

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## Abstract

The current article deals with the issue of intercultural education and teacher training programmes in Romania, which need to include intercultural elements into primary and secondary education. An incursion into the definitions and concepts of culture and interculturality is made to get a better insight into the background of intercultural education. The philosophy of designing teacher education programmes according to the principles and fundamentals of intercultural education is outlined. A possible syllabus contents, as well as training activities are suggested. In conclusion, there is a real need to introduce intercultural education courses within the pre-service and in-service teacher education curriculum.

## 1. Introduction

Culture is a widely and easily debated concept, directly proportionally with the difficulty of finding a definition for it. The many attempts at defining the concept and the debates in the field of social sciences on the definitions of the term and of their implications in national ideologies and in the practice of public policies are well-known. For example, Kluckhohn & Kroeber (1952) recorded in 1952 no less than 161 definitions of the concept of culture. I will not outline here the whole history of the concept of culture because the first attempts to define it, essentialist, static

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and rigid, ended up in outmoded definitions for the current society, based on open contexts and variable geometry cultures (Nedelcu, 2008). The definition I prefer, derived from the current of cultural relativism, is at the same time the one that meets with the largest consensus in modern anthropology, culture is, in short, a set of behavioural abilities, notions and forms that individuals acquire as members of a certain culture. According to Geertz (1973, p.89), culture "denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life". According to Lederach (1995), "Culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them" (p. 9).

As such, the concept of culture includes a profound ambiguity, in that, at the same time, it refers to a basic similarity between individuals (these being equally culture-bound), but also to the way in which difference between individuals is produced, culture itself being culture-generative. Thus defined, the concept of culture entails a in fact the co-existence of a plurality of cultures and must therefore be understood from the perspective of relativism, as a cultural current. Cultural relativism reinforces the idea of equality between different cultures in terms of intrinsic value and discourages any attempt at proclaiming one culture as being superior or inferior to others. Values, norms, symbols of a culture must be evaluated within their context and functionality, and not by the criteria of a different culture. Within the given context, the coexistence of several cultures in the same area gave rise to a set of related concepts: multicultural, intercultural, as well as multiculturalism, interculturality.

## 2. Interculturality and multiculturality

Despite a superficial understanding that might consider the two terms as synonyms, the pair of concepts multicultural/ intercultural displays some important differences. Therefore, "multicultural" is a descriptive term, referring to a state of affairs, to several groups living together in the same society. The concept tends to outline the difference or even the clear distinction between cultures and groups being perceived as different and is used mainly in post colonial societies (Great Britain, the Low Countries), where very often, it refers to ethnic groups concurrently living together, without a real relationship between each other (Giordano, 2003).

On the contrary, the concept "intercultural" emphasises the interaction between groups perceived as distinct in a society, referring rather to a dynamic process of exchanges, of dialogue, of group negotiation, as well as the identification of a common language and of a common space in which communication takes place. The intercultural character of a fact is exactly the focus on mutual relationship between the constituent elements of exchanges. The acceptance of cultures' diversity leads to the acceptance of the idea of coexistence of several cultures, to the adoption of multiculturalism, as a policy for diversity management. The term, equivalent to cultural, political, religious, etc. plurality, is predominant in the Anglo-Saxon countries, where the focus is on the recognition of the existence of several ethnic groups as national policy (Taylor, 1992). Beyond the political aspect of the recognition of the co-existence of several ethnic groups within the same state entity, multiculturalism only superficially touches upon the mode of interaction between these groups and upon the permeability between groups towards reciprocal influences.

The awareness of belonging to a certain culture involves, at least indirectly, referring to a different culture from which the individual separates themselves. From this perspective, there can only exist the intercultural awareness, that is, of the fact that a certain culture is perceived as being different from another. Thus, the concept of "interculturality" refers to the space between two groups conceived as belonging to different cultures. In this space intercultural education is born, a dialogue between subjectivities, a negotiation of identities, an interaction between individuals and groups perceived as being culturally different. (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1999). Through education, as an antidote against racism, xenophobia, exclusion and marginalisation, a new inter- and transcultural approach to this issue is pursued, as a result of globalisation.

A possible curriculum for intercultural teacher training needs to comprise topics, such as: Contemporary society trends: the multicultural-intercultural dynamics; The phenomenology of cultural transmission and diffusion; Cultural identity and differences. School consequences; Cultural relativism and pervert effects in education; Filtering social reality through images (categorisation, stereotypes, preconceived ideas); Discrimination; Intolerance; Xenophobia; Ethnocentrism; Racism; Sexism; Chauvinistic nationalism; anti-Semitism; Gerontophobia and juventophobia; The

cultural mosaic; Intercultural education objectives and values; Intercultural requirements and education in the family; Intercultural education-specific methods and activities; Strategies for the experimentation of value diversity; Formal and informal, curricular and extracurricular in intercultural education.

## 3. Intercultural education – contents, objectives, principles and values

Intercultural education lays down for the contemporary world new principles and values through a pedagogic approach of cultural differences. This strategy should take into account the spiritual specificity and cultural, social, economic differences in order to avoid the risks ensuing from misbalanced exchanges between cultures, or more seriously, the tendencies towards the atomisation of cultures. The intercultural approach is neither a new science, nor a new discipline; it is a new methodology, in its inquiry into the educational space, with a view to integrating data from psychology, anthropology, social, cultural, political, historical sciences (Cucos, 2000).

Cultural diversity is a characteristic of contemporary society and it is impossible to live in a world of singularity of culture and language. Intercultural education may be defined as a humanistic and transpersonal education which aims at shaping the individual as a whole, the holistic integration of the individual into universality, developing a unifying conscience, interpersonal and intercultural interaction, cultural transcendence, education through and for values.

The objectives of intercultural education represent an integrating array of education, communication, cooperation, acquisition of new competences and the capacity to empathise. Out of them we may underline objectives such as the respect and valorisation of cultures, education for diversity, antiracist education, anti-bias education, education for all, inclusive education, cross-border education, cooperation beyond the borders of a cultures cultivation of ethnic tolerance. As principles of intercultural education we may list the inclusion of the outcast, active involvement of civil society, strengthening partnerships, intervention of government in order to support education for all. Intercultural education, if it is to be implemented, needs to be respectful of learners' needs (Calleja, 2009).

## 4. The philosophy of teacher education and continuous professional development programmes

The component of teacher training in the spirit of education for diversity is pursued programmatically by several international bodies. As for teacher training at the level of the Council of Europe, the following actions are deemed as necessary for the sake of coherence and methodological unity:
- raising teachers' awareness towards different instantiations of cultural expression;
- recognising and combating ethnocentric attitudes and stereotypes;
- developing teachers' accountability for making children understand the exponents of other cultures;
- understanding the economic, social and political causes and consequences of migration;
- deliberately integrating children belonging to other cultures into the new culture, concurrently with preserving the link with the old culture.

Being involved in intercultural education, teachers should pay attention to the following educational-institutional duties (Rey, 1999, p. 186):
- to ensure the democratic management of the class or of the school, in order to allow for everyone's ability to express oneself, to debate, to respect each other, to assume responsibility;
- to give each student the opportunity of experimenting different roles, such as cheerleader or facilitator, of finding out different management styles, of perceiving and analysing power relations which are established within a group, institution or society, of identifying and being aware of abuses;
- to monitor the role given by schools to foreign languages, cultures, ethical and religious beliefs and students` different competences; to acknowledge the perceptions and attitudes towards equality or marginalisation which are created by these beliefs and competences;
- to supervise the quality of interactions which are established among students; it is known that students participate less and less in interactions and the degree of their participation is given by their status, by their social and economic position, by their ethnic background, language, physical abilities, school results; the organisation of an

education which promotes cooperative learning would ensure a positive exertion of authority and would entail a decrease in the number of inequalities existing in schools;

- to control violence, the young persons who tend to be authoritarian must be treated with understanding and in certain circumstances they must be given the opportunity of cooperating with persons whom they hate or whom they are violent with;
- there is a great concern regarding the persons with special needs in order to integrate them into society; this is not aimed at creating equality among them, it aims at enabling them to behave with dignity, to extend cooperation between educators and students` parents, with social workers, with doctors and nurses.

## 5. Teacher education in line with cultural diversity

From a social point of view, intercultural education encourages contacts, communication, exchanges, which result in the lessening of "social distance". Training and developing the spirit of tolerance represents a major desideratum of intercultural education. The role of the teacher is that of appreciating the students' cultures of origin, making them aware of cultural diversity, surpassing preconceived ideas and stereotypes and practicing a non-discriminating behaviour.

Humanistic and intercultural education is today the focus of all educational systems and all educators. A mission in a perpetual expansion, a result of social learning, the educational system has as educational task the ensure the passage from an egocentric thinking to a solidary thinking, which favours cooperation more than competition, in which a major role is played by educators who have to attest qualifications, competences, knowledge and preoccupations in line with cultural diversity and education ( Rey, 1984), such as:

- - experiment different social roles, from facilitators and cheerleaders, to leaders and managers;
- - militate for the deep understanding of cultures, languages, traditions, religions, convictions;
- - observe the quality of relationships between students in the service of promoting everybody's prestige;
- - contain violence phenomena;
- - ensure the observance of all categories of minorities' rights;
- - ensure the group's openness towards the outer world, favouring empathy towards other individuals or other groups;
- - identify ethnocentric attitudes and stereotypes, as well as elaborate appropriate strategies to fight against them;

A special perspective might be provided by the so-called "stereocultural education", which, in the author's opinion, would facilitate the acknowledgement and awareness-raising towards cultural filters, decrypting unknown cultural stimuli and would be a good occasion to discover the extraordinary variety displayed by various cultures, life styles, forms of social organization, behaviour norms. A possible curriculum for intercultural teacher training needs to comprise topics such as:

- – Contemporary society trends: the multicultural-intercultural dynamics;
- – The phenomenology of cultural transmission and diffusion;
- – Cultural identity and differences. School consequences;
- – Cultural relativism and pervert effects in education;
- – Filtering social reality through images (categorisation, stereotypes, preconceived ideas);
- – Discrimination; Intolerance; Xenophobia;
- – Ethnocentrism; Racism; Sexism; Chauvinistic nationalism; Anti-Semitism;
- – Gerontophobia and juventophobia; The cultural mosaic;
- – Intercultural education objectives and values;
- – Intercultural requirements and education in the family;
- – Intercultural education-specific methods and activities;
- – Formal and informal, curricular and extracurricular in intercultural education.

## 6. Conclusions

The contemporary world is confronted with the globalization of information, the cultural cyberspace, and the social-economic interaction between different cultures, which generates social problems, multicultural and

intercultural clashes. National and European policies must focus on intercultural education on a legislative, normative, formative, social-economic level, through continuous promotion of common strategies, elaborating and promoting an intercultural curriculum, and the systemic approach to intercultural education. At national level there is a need for democratic normative-legislative regulation of turning to account intercultural education. The contents of intercultural education aim at both respect and valorisation of cultures, cross-border communication, openness towards otherness, through the elimination of fear towards foreigners, as well as diversifying the types of education: education for all, inclusive education comprehensive education, religious education, aesthetic-cultural education, etc.

To conclude, at the level of educational and institutional policies, some operational perspectives are required, through optional programmes/courses/modules of intercultural education, the creation of social, educational, professional conditions to promote interculturality, the elaboration of evaluation indicators for training programmes and teachers, through the inclusion of intercultural education into the initial and continuous teacher training programmes.

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