

The Dimensions of Intercultural Education

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Abstract. *The forthcoming society will be a mixed society from a cultural, ethnic, racial and religious point of view. One of the most important indicators of maturity and sustainability of a society is represented by its ability to articulate and translate into practice an educational system capable of valorizing the educational potential offered by the heterogeneity of its structure. Contrary to general opinion, students are not the only bearers of biases generated by this diversity and, as such, intercultural education will have to go beyond the sphere of formal education and engage in non-formal and informal education.*

Keywords: interculturalism, cultural values, multiculturalism, education, contemporary society.

Introduction

Globalization, the increase of the dynamism of individuals' mobility and the promotion of human rights on a growing scale are the main elements that determine and at the same time legitimize cultural diversity and socio-cultural interactions of the majority-minority type. The moment society became aware of the emergence of this challenge, the solution proposed for the proper management of this state of fact was multiculturalism. For a long time, the concepts of multiculturalism and interculturalism, multicultural education and intercultural education have been considered superposable. However, educational practice has highlighted the fact that the two aforementioned syntagms are based on distinct areas of reality. Multiculturalism refers to the simple recognition of the existence of the cultural variety of contemporary society, and refers to the totality of the steps undertaken regarding the individual and often individualistic conservation and valorization of this variety, respectively the differences that characterize the various cultural areas. From this perspective, multicultural education would have the role of allowing each culture to promote its own cultural values and specific qualities through appropriate educational actions. In other words, multicultural education ultimately involves an overall restructuring of the educational phenomenon in the sense of multiplying the activities that it subordinates based on the typology of the various cultural identities specific to a particular society. Reproaches to multiculturalism in general and especially to multicultural education refer to the fact that, through the activities carried out, it provides only a certain kind of enclavation, the perpetuation, within strictly isolated frames, of the socio-cultural identity of a particular group, ignoring the possibilities of overcoming the linguistic or cultural barriers that separate the different communities. A strictly multicultural education thus promotes only the differences between different cultures and the cultural identity specific to each of the communities that make up a particular society. This may contribute, under certain circumstances, in spite of the promoted educational ideals, to the ostensive accentuation of the differences between the respective communities or even to the appearance of antagonistic relations between their cultures. Intercultural education, principally superior to multicultural education, was thus imposed as an alternative. The recourse to intercultural

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education was determined by the characteristics of the contemporary society, namely the emphasis on the democratic character of social organization, the high degree of individual mobility, the postmodern culture centered on the individual and individualism, and last but not least, the increasing number of those who emigrate from their country of origin to cultural areas and zones, sometimes radically different in relation to the specifics of their native culture. Thus, intercultural education facilitates not only the promotion of the identity of various ethnic, racial or religious minorities, but also the interaction between them and the majority, as well as the development of attitudes such as tolerance and the valorization of diversity¹

For a long period, even as far as the present day, as is the case with many countries among which Romania is also unfortunately included, intercultural education is among other disciplines that make up the phrase "New education", such as nutritional education, entrepreneurship education, environmental education, etc. and is classified, at best, as an optional discipline.

If Malraux asserted that the 21st century would be religious, or it would not be at all, as far as we are concerned, we affirm that the 21st century society will be a functionally intercultural one or it will not be at all.

Our statement is based both on evidence from current geo-political developments (the massive and steady increase in the number of immigrants arriving in Europe from the Middle East or West Africa - approximately 3.5 million people between 2015 and 2017), and on demographic forecasts regarding the birth rate evolution, which estimate that by 2050 the labor market on our continent will have a deficit of 75 million employees². This state of affairs will cause profound mutations not only at the social level but also at the level of mentality in the majority-minority relations in the sense that there will inevitably and perhaps dramatically be a transition from the prejudice "they need us" to the reality "we need them".

We thus consider that it is absolutely necessary not only to strengthen the curricular status of intercultural education at the level of European educational policies but also to capitalize on the potential of non-formal and informal dimensions of intercultural education.

The starting point of the effective realization of formal intercultural education is the quality of teacher training. In this context, we mainly refer to the requirement to organize the initial training of future teachers in a manner capable of equipping them with a set of skills and abilities adequate to achieving the goals proposed by intercultural education.

In this context, however, we would like to point out that the advancement of educational policies that are limited to promoting intercultural education in curriculum reforms, developing new textbooks, or infusing intercultural content into existing textbooks is, in our opinion, doomed to failure from the very beginning. One of the sine qua non conditions for the achievement of intercultural

¹ C. Stan, *Education theory. Actuality and perspectives*, Cluj-Napoca, PUC, 2001, p. 123.

² A. Gavreliuc, *Intercultural Psychology*, Iași, Polirom, 2011, p. 89.

education is the existence of a teaching staff well-trained both professionally and attitudinally in order to face the challenges implied by the paradigm of diversity. We expect that, on the short-term, education should be able to contribute to the satisfaction of labor market requirements, and lifelong training courses should support recycling and reconversion of the active human resources in employment.³

The issue of initial teacher education for the effective transposition of intercultural education into school practice is a constant concern for various international structures and bodies. For example, regarding the training of trainers for intercultural education at the level of the Council of Europe, the following directions and action strategies are recommended:

- making future teachers aware regarding the different forms of manifestation of members of different cultural populations;
- the de facto recognition of the existence of race, ethnic or gender stereotypes as well as prejudices and opposing behaviors in relation to diversity;
- the constant transposition into practice of attitudes aimed at combating them with maximum efficiency;
- the accountability of trainers in relation to the need for early acquaintance of those educated with diversity, with the understanding and acceptance of exponents of other cultures, religions or ethnicity;
- the correct understanding of economic, social and political causes and consequences regarding the migration phenomenon and the facilitation of integration into the new culture;

As a result of the analysis carried out on these issues, C. Cucuș states that the training of teachers should be done not only through a disciplinary or psychopedagogical perspective, but also through the perspective of social work, of engaging as cultural facilitators, as social actors and as citizens. "Being a good teacher requires you to overcome the problems of the class or school, to know how to handle situations that go beyond the school space. Understanding and handling certain socio-cultural phenomena are good premises for the intercultural trainer. It does not mean that we have to make all teachers psychological, sociological or cultural anthropologists, but we have to promote a coherent training in the social direction. You cannot do intercultural education if you do not have the competence to connect or link different cultural symbols or if you do not know the stakes of the different cultural formations of the space in which you operate"⁴

However, the studies undertaken in this field denote the fact that initial teacher training for the challenges that intercultural education provokes is almost non-existent. In this regard, the obstacles encountered in this approach can be of several kinds⁵:

- the absence or insufficiency of a clear and accurate diagnosis of the actual situation of the education system or the failure to reflect the socio-cultural

³ A. D. Manea , "Coordinates of Lifelong Education", in *Astra Salvensis*, V (2015), p. 168-171.

⁴ C. Cucuș, *Education. Cultural and intercultural dimensions*, Iași, Polirom, 2000, p. 97.

⁵ M.C. Munoz, "Les pratiques interculturelles en education", in J. Demorgon, E. M. Lipiansky (coord.), "L'ecole confrontee a la diversite culturelle," in *Guide de l'interculturel en formation*, Retz, Paris, 1999, p. 27.

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realities of each country can lead to major difficulties in the effort to achieve adequate initial teacher training for intercultural education;

➤ lack of time and/or poor motivation of students and teaching staff to thoroughly prepare for intercultural education;

➤ gaps and deficiencies existent at the level of university-community and university-civil society partnerships, deficiencies amplified by an inaccurate definition of partners' competences and commitments;

➤ high social mobility, specific to contemporary society, makes it impossible to build coherent, lasting strategies;

➤ refusal, denial or conflict of shared values not only in regard to representatives of different cultures but also between generations or different sexes;

➤ ignorance or disregard of the historical and sociological realities that led to the phenomenon of structuring the identity of both the majority and the minority.

A first step towards raising awareness of the problem of intercultural education is organizing the instructive-educational process for the formation of the future teachers in order to induce the firm belief in the injustice of any ethnic, racial or religious prejudices and equipping them with information that allows them to reasonably and credibly argue that being in the minority represents the main way of benefiting from an alternative reference system and implicitly another way of perceiving the socio-cultural reality.

In this sense, for example, learning another language or simply being curious about the language spoken by others represents an openness towards otherness, just like entering another geographical space can simultaneously represent entering another cultural space. Encouraging the curiosity and willingness of those educated to explore the potential offered by the variety of the socio-cultural space is an important motivational resort for a correct, unbiased relation to the representatives of the various minority constituents of the alterity.

Interculturalism has the purpose to reshape the cultural phenomenon by presenting, interpreting and reevaluating social experiences in the context of diversity and differences. The effort to accomplish an intercultural type of education is not limited to the physical boundaries of school as an institution or to the typical schooling timeline. Intercultural education allows for the structuring of an open cultural identity, having the aim to coordinate the youth in view of assimilating culture from an anthropological perspective, to understand the other's viewpoint by relativistic positioning, as well as to legitimate the cultural, ethnic, racial or religious identity.⁶

However, we would like to point out in this context that intercultural education is not an instructive-educational approach meant only to positively change the attitude of the majority towards the minority, but it also aims to ensure a correct and adequate rapport of the various minorities (racial, ethnic, religious, etc.) to the majority population.

⁶ A. D. Manea, "Nowadays' multi- and intercultural phenomenon", in *Proceedings of the International Conference Studies on Literature, Discourse and Multicultural Dialogue*, XXI (2014), p. 63-67.

The teachers involved in intercultural education should, in the opinion of M. Rey⁷, pay special attention to the following priorities:

➤ to promote and ensure a democratic governance of both class and school in order to enable each member the possibility to express themselves, to debate, to take into account one another, to assume responsibilities;

➤ to offer each pupil the chance to experience different roles, including the animator or leader, to get acquainted with different forms of leadership, to perceive and analyze the power relations of the group, institution or society, to detect abuses and take note of them;

➤ to watch the language, cultures, ethical or religious beliefs, students' different skills; to observe to what perceptions or attitudes they lead, equality or marginalization;

➤ to supervise the quality of student interactions; it is known that pupils are increasingly involved in interactions and the degree of participation depends on the prestige they have in the group; their prestige depends, among other things, on the socio-economic situation, ethnicity, language, physical skills, school results; organizing an educational system that encourages cooperative learning would ensure an optimal exercise of prestige and would reduce inequalities in school;

➤ to prevent and manage violent phenomena, young people with authoritarian tendencies need to be tempered and put in a position to collaborate in different circumstances with their targets of hate or violence;

➤ to provide persons belonging to minority groups with an additional understanding to integrate them without realizing a pseudo-equality, but in the sense of allowing everyone to manifest their individuality with dignity;

➤ to promote the opening of the group to the outside and to favor an attitude of empathy and solidarity with members of other minorities or groups;

➤ to work closely with student families, the local community, social workers and representatives of various minority groups⁸

Given that the exploration of a different or foreign cultural universe is not a luxury for adequate intercultural training but a necessity dictated by the current context of globalization, another set of general competences considered essential and indispensable for teachers who choose intercultural education are:

➤ the ability to understand and operationally define the fundamental concepts of interculturalism (*culture, ethnicity, identity, self-identification, hetero-identification, negative discrimination, positive discrimination, self-discrimination, hetero-discrimination, cultural relativism, acculturation, prejudice, stereotyping, culpability, victimization, assimilation, civic patriotism, pluralist integration etc.*);

➤ the willingness to collect ethnographic and anthropological data on students and the sociocultural environment of origin so that they can formulate and articulate effective strategies for collaboration between the school and the family;

⁷ M. Rey , "From "mono" logic to "inter" logic. Paths for intercultural and solidarity education", *Intercultural education. Experiences, policies, strategies*, Iași, Polirom, 1999, p. 186.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 186.

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- the intercultural communication competence required to work with parents or people who are part of a different cultural environment;
- the capacity to manage conflicts of values and cultural disagreements through democratic deliberation, intercultural mediation and negotiation;
- the ability to identify and provide the class with situations of major exemplary power in terms of the typology of majority-minority interactions;
- the development of criteria to assess the intercultural character of school curricula and their impact, assessment procedures, minority language education policies, the presence of cultural stereotypes in school textbooks, the intercultural climate of school institutions⁹.

Including the competences and abilities specific to intercultural education in the field of lifelong learning strategies for future teachers and the appropriate motivation of trainers in this direction is, in our opinion, one of the fundamental priorities of the reform of the teacher training system and a basic condition the functioning of diversity-based societies. By encouraging an intercultural attitude, one may open way towards dialogue and communication among cultural groups, with beneficial consequences on the comprehension of differences between these groups. By instilling values such as respect for otherness, tolerance for diversity or complementarity among values, education may capitalize the potential wealth of diversity, without deleting the cultural identity, and offer the premises for paying respect to the differences within systems of reciprocal attitudes.¹⁰

Although important, the formal dimension of intercultural education must necessarily be complemented by its non-formal dimension. This requires the recourse to non-formal valences of intercultural education. The repertoire of strategies and means at the disposal of the teacher willing to practice intercultural pedagogy is particularly varied, including,¹¹ elements such as:

- the educational valorization of local community resources (studies and thematic circles on the contribution of personalities belonging to different cultures to the history and development of the respective community);
- the organization of celebrations or other events in order to highlight traditions, garments or gastronomy specific to both the majority and the various minorities;
- expanding the students' knowledge of the history, culture and values of minority communities by presenting artistic or documentary films, works of art or literary creations that present intercultural instructive-formative elements.

We also point out that intercultural education must also become an integral part of adult education. This necessity is imposed, for example, by the many challenges faced by a manager of an institution or organization that includes

⁹ L. Bârlogeanu, *Intercultural education*, Bucharest., MEC, 2005, p. 78; D. M. Văduva, "The intercultural outpouring of the teacher and the traps of the psycho-socio-cultural implication", in *A new challenge for education: interculturality*, Iași, Polirom, 2001, p. 56.

¹⁰ A. D. Manea, C. Stan, "Education and inter-culturalism within Romanian social field," in *Education* 21, 9. (2011), p. 1-12.

¹¹ L.Cohan, L., Bernstein, C., "Teaching about Ethnic Diversity", in *ERIC Digest*, 32 (1986), p. 32.

employees of various ethnic, racial or religious minorities in its structure, ensuring efficiency and organizational cohesion in such a situation requiring solid intercultural skills.

One should also not neglect the informal dimension of intercultural education, given the ever-growing impact of media influences on the behavior and attitudes of contemporary men. For example, the media coverage of elements capable of dulling the perception of discrepancies and leading to accepting and valorizing diversity, regardless of its forms of manifestation, through documentaries or even humorous programs.

Cultural commitment aims to constantly transpose intercultural philosophy into an effective intercultural behavior. The mere knowledge of the principles of interculturalism and the legal regulations is not enough to ensure the expression of fair relations between the majority and cultural, ethnic, religious or racial minority communities. Due to this fact, intercultural education is summoned to ensure a progressive and systematic engagement of students into practical activities meant to give adequate value to the cultural differences at the level of the specific society.¹²

We thus believe that success in building a functioning society capable of managing and harnessing the ethnic, racial or religious differences between its members is to a great extent dependent on the capacity of society in general and educational policies to specifically ensure the complementarity of formal, non-formal and informal dimensions in order to achieve the goals that intercultural education proposes.

¹² C. Stan, "The affirmation of identity through intercultural education in the context of contemporary society," in *Globalization and Intercultural Dialogue. Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, XXI, (2014), p. 417-427.

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