

## **The Foundations of Intercultural Education**

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**Abstract:** At present, when within the same society, contacts between different cultures become more and more numerous, the space of the individual existence surpasses the traditional limits of the original forming, and socializing background, the intercultural approach to education becomes a disconcerting necessity for the present and the future. Within the contemporary education, together with the “new types of education”, the intercultural education represents an infusion of new elements on the traditional contents by advancing an active and participative pedagogy, centered on the educated person and aiming at cooperation between groups and equal educational chances.

**Key Words:** intercultural education, identity, attitude

### **Introduction**

As an important matter to all those who follow the evolution of humanity in general and/or of the human rational being in particular, *education* represents that process oriented towards the spiritual fulfillment of the person and of the community, which proposes, during its development, involvement, living, communication between actual individuals within the multiple and complex changes, mutations in all compartments of existence. Over the last two decades issues like the continual deterioration of the environment or the atmosphere, the limited nature of natural resources, the rate of demographic growth etc. have led to the idea of an interdependence between them and to the conclusion that development can't take place without peace, that peace can't be authentic without respecting human rights and ensuring fundamental freedoms, that in their turn these freedoms and rights are illusory when there still are people so poor that surviving is their only ideal. All these problems have led to stating a new concept – *the problems of the contemporary world*. (Adler, M.J.1971)

The educational systems have tried to find solutions to the challenges raised by the development of the contemporary world, despite the skeptics who maintain that education cannot play an important part in preparing the tomorrow's world and in ensuring a better future. The specialists who believe in the transforming power of the education and in its capacity to contribute with specific resources to the development of the future are aware of the fact that education can't solve all the problems of the contemporary world on its own, but in the same time a strong and durable solution can't be conceived without of the educational systems. Thus, we believe that the intercultural education constitutes an answer to the development requirements and the dynamics of the contemporaneity.

The philosophy of the cultural pluralism, which is discussed in the occidental media, constitutes an action background in many democratic states of the world. “The pluralist ideology advances numerous presumptions upon the nature of pluralist-democratic societies and the function of ethnic groups in the individual's socializing skills and the responsibility of their members towards safeguarding their own cultural values. [...] The cultural pluralism promotes the hypothesis that ethnic minorities have a unique learning style; thus the analytical program's in schools and the educational curriculum should be revised in order to suit the cognitive style and the spiritual profile of students who belong to different ethnic groups”. (Cozma, Teodor, 2001) It is necessary to promote attachment and ethnic understanding and the students must be helped to acquire skills, thus allowing the ethnic group to gain the signification power of the large culture of the world. According to some analysts nowadays we need a self-critical of the occidental monocentrism, a critical distancing from its ethical and scientific dogmatism; we need to state new principles of living together and reorganizing our existence based on new points of view, on resymbolising our life, on new ways of analyzing and codifying our experiences.

### **Method of the Study**

The intercultural education oscillates between the problem of the objective contents of knowledge and the one that aims at intersubjective relationships. The intercultural approach is an intellectual adventure, with its restless aspects for teachers and students because it moves away from the norm, but it opens channels towards stating liberties, individualities, open and multiple identities, by developing the knowledge exchange between partners, a forming demand and offer. The intercultural orientation of education refers to putting into practice several “types” of pedagogies, for example:

- a pedagogy centered on the person being educated;
- an active and interactive pedagogy;(Allport, G. W. 1991)
- a pedagogy that takes into account the learning of decentring and develops an intercultural communication skill;
- a pedagogy of the project that favors interdependency among the group members and promotes cooperation;
- a pedagogy of the partnership within the educational system (among the teachers of a school, among teachers of different origins, researchers, trainers) but also in connection to the other elements of the social, economic and cultural environment (parents, economic agents, representatives of local authorities, etc.);
- a pedagogy of the exchange and interdisciplinarity based on all kinds of school correspondence, traveling abroad, making connections between several sets of knowledge and values that were initially acquired separately.

The intercultural education urges us to face and respect alterity by promoting mutual tolerance and understanding. At the beginning of this millennium the space of the individual existence overcomes the traditional limits of the original environment (of initial forming and socializing). The meeting and dialogue of cultures, despite the distances that separate them in time and space, are inevitable and often difficult; thus the matter of cultures coexisting within the same society seems to be, as stated before, a rather disconcerting defiance of the present and the future. The intercultural education represents a strategy for preparing future democratic societies so that people take into account the cultures they represent when they interact (Jackson, T. 1995)

According to McLeon, the analysis of the multicultural education typology leads to three specificities, the last one defining the intercultural approach:

1. The *ethnic specificity* approach – that is the approach or planning of the multicultural education based on ethnic-cultural perspectives. This approach tends to put the accent on culture preserving or on developing multicultural policies;
2. The *problem-oriented* approach – includes those people and groups whose fundamental orientation towards multiculturalism answers certain problems. Immigrants and their integration are considered to be problems that need solutions for reception centers, interpreting programs and immigration services. Also racism could be considered a critical matter which makes many people think that antiracism is an aspect of multiculturalism. Others consider relations between groups an extremely important matter and consequently they develop intercultural or inter-groups programs;
3. The *Cultural/Intercultural* approach – it is a more general approach of the intercultural education; it takes place where multiculturalism is an ethic which constitutes the basis of education and of the entire school curriculum and includes preoccupations for ensuring continuity, cultural and linguistic development, matters related to the ethnic and racial relationships, integrating emigrants, bilingualism or human rights. This approach is a comprehensive social and cultural engagement and it is based on defining multiculturalism as including or incorporating culture in general as well as in an ethnic cultural way, paying special attention to diversity and ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious pluralism.

The intercultural education originates in the social, economic and cultural relationships, which characterize society in general; in order to apply the intercultural education the teacher must be trained not only for managing strictly didactical situations but also for facilitating the spiritual and cultural permeability of the students. On the other hand, training doesn't only mean knowing, but also practicing intercultural because only the theoretical knowledge of the cultural characteristics or differences doesn't necessarily give cultural skills to the person who possesses it, as well as knowing the other doesn't favor intercultural behavior( Bruner, J. 1970).

The intercultural training steps are difficult and face mainly two problems:

1. each person's inherent difficulty to perceive cultural differences and especially minority ones. The perceptions are selective, ethnically centered, affected by fear of the other, preconceived ideas, tendencies to reduce things to schemes, attitudes of devaluation and discrimination;(Dewey, J. 1972)
2. our social and cultural identity “colors” the process of knowing the others. The value decoding concerning foreign cultures are made through value paradigms already fixed that influence the quality of perceiving the other.

We believe that, for any teacher, learning to receive alterity and diversity is a moral obligation in the present conditions. Thus we need a methodical and structured training, as “the foreigner”, “the foreign” and “the straneity” occupy a more and more important position in our lives. “We must learn how to read the present day with “broadness”, to permanently question the habitual and the habits, to distance ourselves from familiar things, to approach more boldly what is unfamiliar to us” (Cucoş, Constantin, 2000).

According to Micheline Rey, the intercultural training involves at least two dimensions that are permanently linked to each other: a dimension of “knowledge” (as objective as possible and built from multiple angles) and a dimension of “experience” (subjective and relational), but we only mention them here as we already discussed them in detail. The intercultural training must concisely endow the teacher with methodological or conceptual instruments but also with suitable attitudes or behaviors in order to distance him/her from the didactic position. As highlighted by Ct. Cucoş, recognizing plurality forces us to reorganize the teacher training systems, and this new formula will turn variation from a negative thing into a norm and a stable reference point. C. Camilleri shortly describes a few basic procedural rules for intercultural training:

- *Understanding the logic of each culture.* Cultures must not be valued through hierarchy and each individual will understand that he/she is part of a cultured endowed with all the attributes of dignity and value. The pejorative judgments of any culture must disappear, proving the indestructible ties between realities, environment of origin and their cultural specificities;
- *Educating from the perspective of relativism.* Cultural systems must be judged in a detached, decentralized manner in order to overcome ethnically centered judgments. The first level of this position consists of presenting your cultural model without imposing it. The second level consists of understanding that we have no reason to consider our own culture superior. Not only must we be tolerant to others, but also it is only fair to admit that we cannot legitimize a hierarchical value judgment upon two or more cultures;
- *Do not consider cultures to be sacred.* By recognizing certain cultures as acceptable practices, we must not consider them sacred or believe they are larger than others. The intercultural helps moving away from a culture imposed or dictated by a group, imposed as transcendence, towards understanding culture as a dialogue with others, thus moving from the “product culture” to the “process culture”, from a static to a dynamic perspective;
- *To take heterogeneity seriously.* Heterogeneity should not be blamed when it appears naturally, without being imposed. We live in more and more multiform and different cultural spaces. To be against racism, to know the mechanisms of exclusion and to fight artificial barriers between individuals or communities is an attitude that must be acquired by the person designated to educate for diversity;
- *To recognize misunderstandings and conflicts.* To grasp reality as it is, even if there are certain deficits from an intercultural point of view, is an exam of honesty and professionalism. The conflicts between cultures or people with different cultural backgrounds are obvious, and admitting their existence constitutes a first step towards solving them. The social sometimes facilitates intercultural conflicts; the economic insecurity, unemployment, the competition on the work market, social changes, pride also has a cultural component that leads to conflict, including from an intercultural point of view. To all these we can add the differences of opinion between members of different cultures regarding delicate matters like: polygamy, abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia etc.

In our country, the initial training of teachers for intercultural education is almost inexistent. Teacher must be trained not only for managing strictly didactic situations but also for facilitating the spiritual and cultural permeability of their students. To be against racism, to know the mechanisms of exclusion and to fight artificial barriers between individuals or communities is an attitude that must be acquired by the person designated to educate for diversity . That’s why we should pay attention to forming trainers for intercultural education by using research of intercultural psycho pedagogy, and also from the domains of cultural anthropology, social psychology, development psychology, conflict solving management etc. A virtual curriculum for intercultural training should include themes like:

3. Tendencies of the contemporary society: the multicultural-intercultural dynamics;
4. The phenomenon of transmitting and diffusing culture;
5. Cultural identity and difference-consequences in the school system;
6. Cultural relativism;
7. Filtering social reality through images (categorization, stereotypes, prejudice);
8. Strategies of relating to others;
9. Discrimination;
10. Intolerance;
11. Xenophobia;
12. Ethnocentrism;
13. Racism;
14. Sexism;
15. Objectives and values of the intercultural education;

16. Intercultural exigencies and family education;
17. Strategies for experimenting the diversity of values;
18. Formal and informal, curricular and extracurricular in intercultural training etc.

As it can be noticed, there are generous themes and multiple possibilities in the field of training for intercultural education. Where there is intuition, pedagogical skills, will to self improve and where the teacher understands the evolution of life and of the contemporary world, he/she will know what method to choose so that the result of his/her transformation –and why not?– his/her accomplishment to raise positive feelings within their own community or school environment.

Learning in heterogeneous schools and classes (multicultural) is more an advantage than a handicap and it requires openness and cooperation instead of selection and rejection. We know that identity is built within a relationship of difference \ likeness with the others, and in a pluralist society, the relationship identity-alterity must be approached in a plural manner. As stated by C. Camilleri, we are what we are as individuals also by the “lack” that we are looking for or finding in alterity. Within this projection in/towards the other we can become accomplished or understand our plenitude or real limits. The intercultural education urges us to welcome and respect alterity by promoting tolerance and mutual understanding.

## **Conclusions and Discussion**

We believe that within the Romanian school system the reform should be given a more intercultural dimension because such an articulation of our school system could constitute a solid basis for creating a democratic, open and permissive society, pluralist as well as united. The intercultural approach to curriculum could enrich the relational aspect of the inhabitants of our country by giving a new dimension to daily human interactions and by considerably reducing phenomena of intolerance, egocentric tendencies, extreme pragmatism, as well as psychological and social marginalization phenomena.

The intercultural education teaches us one essential thing: pejorative judgments of any culture must disappear thus proving the indestructible ties between their realities, background and cultural specificities. Due to the major changes that took place recently and that endanger the world’s ecosystem, larger and more diverse media have realized that the ideological fundamentals of our egocentric society are inadequate and have claimed new paradigms of behavior and action.

A new challenge has been launched for education: to contribute to promoting human rights in a way that overcomes ethnic centrism. If it succeeds in determining new generations to admit the complex role of interdependencies and interactions and to actively, acquire constructive and dynamic skills of using individual rights and liberties in an intercultural way. Education will prepare them to better understand the new stakes within our societies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and will ensure, by admitting the collective identity and the common future, a solid and durable economic, social and cultural development.

After all, as Micheline Rey noticed, this challenge is aimed at the completely social community because the ability of education to respond to its expectations depends on its adhesion to the principles of solidarity and the actual choices.

Because of the perspective of building a unitary European space, of the international character of economy, of globalizing information the objectives of an enlarged intercultural practice in education are: admitting the diversity of the cultural codes, communicating in an intercultural context, being aware of your own cultural identity, overcoming stereotypes and prejudice, knowing the institutions and living conditions in various European countries, cooperation with representatives of any culture. We believe that all these will bring about profound mutations in a more or less near future related to the system of thinking, feeling and acting of each of us. The question that still stands is the following: in what measure are we willing to change our mentalities, even if we see that it is necessary?

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