

Developing the Intercultural Competence of High School Students

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Abstract

The article presents an assessment questionnaire aimed at testing the students' current level of intercultural competence. It comprises 72 items that were formulated in accordance with the objectives of intercultural education. The items were adapted from an assessment tool developed by the Pestalozzi Program and from a manual developed by the Council of Europe. The second part of the article presents the key findings of the observation stage of the pedagogical experiment and highlights the main areas of improvement during the formation stage of the pedagogical experiment. It also presents one good practice exemplar that was implemented in order to increase the students' level of awareness on human rights and equal treatment, with a focus on the Roma minority. The activity aimed to raise students' awareness of human rights as well as their ability to react to discrimination and hate speech in public space.

Keywords: intercultural, competence, praxeology, pedagogical, experiment, students

From an educational perspective, the principle of ensuring equal opportunities is one of the principles governing the secondary and higher levels of education in Romania, as well as the process of lifelong learning. From a pedagogical point of view, equal opportunities represent “equal access and treatment at school, regardless of the socioeconomic background they come from, regardless of their physical potential or their intellectual abilities, ethnicity, religion, etc.” [1, p. 83]. At a praxiological level, ensuring equal opportunities means treating people fairly, avoiding prejudice, but also creating conditions that appreciate diversity and promote human dignity in the work environment and in society.

Equal opportunities entail offering multiple options to people with different abilities and skills, ensuring that education is open to all the people, regardless of their age and socio-economic conditions. The educational system needs to be made available to everyone, to respect their specific needs, to encourage diversity and to create the premises for equal access to social life.

According to Marinescu M. [6, p. 199], ensuring equal opportunities in education is one of the criteria for success in achieving intercultural education in school, along with the following criteria: ensuring a balance between the various major purposes of education, ensuring multiple possibilities for communication and collaboration (even between different groups), reflecting the reality specific to multicultural societies in all types of curriculum, but also presenting information from multiple perspectives, in such a way as to stimulate unity awareness through diversity.

In the view of the authors Donders & Laaksonen, the link between intercultural competence and ensuring equal opportunities resides in the basic principles of human rights. In particular, the human rights principles related to interconnectedness, equality, respect, dignity, participation, inclusion and empowerment are all closely aligned with intercultural competence [8, pp.39-40].

Intercultural competences encompass a wide range of transversal knowledge, skills and attitudes and are based on one of the four pillars of knowledge developed by J. Delors, with a view to the holistic development of the human personality. The educational purpose to learn to live with others (or to coexist) refers to cooperation, communication and participation in human activities.

Learning to live together with others is one of the four pillars of knowledge and education proposed by J. Delors in the Report for UNESCO Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century that was published as “Learning: the Treasure Within”. The other pillars proposed by J. Delors are: learning to do, learning to be and learning to know. This fundamental type of education involves the acquisition of transversal skills that will facilitate the adaptation of students to a dynamic, constantly changing world, by developing the ability to relate to those around them, to empathize with them, to overcome prejudices, to collaborate in teams characterized by diversity, to participate in solving problems, etc.

The Council of Europe proposes a discrimination between related concepts: diversity, which is seen as “variation within a larger group that shares a common basis”, thus implying openness, acceptance and inclusion. Otherness, on the other hand, presupposes “comparison with an emphasis on difference”, being a fertile ground for the emergence of attitudes of prejudice and discrimination, but also of exclusion. [5, p. 22]

The competence of learning to live together with others is fundamental to eliminating the societal divide that seems to be intensifying in 21st century society. From this perspective, it is important to better understand others, especially those whose beliefs and practices may be quite different. Much progress can be made to help improve the skills to live and work together despite the differences that seem to separate and sometimes engulf people, leading to conflict and even war. These educational goals can be achieved by developing intercultural competences and promoting intercultural dialogue. Many international organizations, such as UNESCO, work to build a sense of empathy and solidarity among students of all ages to act as global citizens in accordance with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially Sustainable Development Goals 4 (on education) and 16 (on promoting just, peaceful and inclusive societies).

Education for global citizenship aims to encourage students of all ages to take on active roles, both locally and globally, in building more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive and secure societies and is based on three areas of learning:

- 1) cognitive: knowledge and thinking skills needed to better understand the world and its complexities;
- 2) socio-emotional: values, attitudes and social skills that allow students to develop affectively, psychosocially and physically and live together with others in a respectful and peaceful way;
- 3) behavioral: conduct, performance, practical application and involvement. [9]

The present pedagogical research is part of a pedagogical experiment of a thesis on the topic “Developing the intercultural competence of high school students through the use of information technologies”. The evaluation of the students’ current level of intercultural competence is part of some pedagogical research of an inductive nature, which involves “accumulation of experimental and theoretical-methodological data, in order to scientifically substantiate the action and theoretical approaches, which enrich and guide the theory and practice of education” [7, p. 7].

For the in-depth understanding of the level of development of the intercultural competence among the students of the “Mihai Eminescu” College of Bacău and in order to optimize it, a scientific research was carried out, using the pedagogical experiment method. The purpose of the pedagogical experiment is to validate through experiment the pedagogical model of developing the intercultural competence of high school students through the use of information technologies.

The research pursues a change in strategic objectives, among which the most relevant are: capitalizing on new methodological resources, emphasizing the formative nature of education, promoting new types of educational relationships, implementing self-directed learning and capitalizing

on self-education. This micro-educational innovation is expected to result in the improvement of educational practice at the level of the “Mihai Eminescu” College of Bacău [7, p. 9]. The objectives aim at the qualitative transformation of certain mentalities, the elimination of an outdated behavior of students and teaching staff, doubled by the promotion of a new type of behavior that ensures increased efficiency of the educational process. Once it has been developed through the pedagogical experiment, the intercultural competence can be demonstrated by the “positive representation of the other” [4, p. 56] and by adopting an open mentality towards otherness.

The research sample consists of three general secondary classes, which allowed for a consistent sampling base. The experimental sample is made up of students of class XI C, specializing in philology and the control sample includes the students of class XI A, specializing in mathematics-informatics and the students of class XI E, specializing in natural sciences.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the experimental sample and the control sample

	Experimental sample	Control sample	
Criterion	Clasa a XI-a C	Clasa a XI-a A	Clasa a XI-a E
Number of students	33	23	28
Girls	21	4	17
Boys	12	19	11
Rural residence	14	15	17
Urban residence	19	8	11
Number of students from a different county	1	1	0
Class average in the academic years 2021-2022 and 2022-2023	8.73	8.04	8.02
Number of students from the Republic of Moldova	1	0	1
Number of students of different ethnicity	0	0	0

As it can be seen in table 1, in the ascertainment phase of the experiment, equivalence was ensured between the experimental sample and the control samples. Thus, they can be considered comparable in all aspects.

The selection criterion among the three classes in the research group consisted of class specialization. General secondary education aims at the development and diversification of key competences and the developing specific competences depending on the sector, profile, specialization or qualification. The real profile is based on exact sciences, while the human profile is based on humanities and social sciences. Thus, the human profile is more prone to observing the interrelationships between various cultures and the values of humanity, which is the object of study of intercultural education.

The pedagogical research is carried out through a questionnaire-based survey that included questions with precoded answers. The content of the questions is aimed at obtaining information about the current level of development of the intercultural competence among the general secondary students

The assessment questionnaire includes 72 items targeting the three components that make up the competence: knowledge, skills and attitudes. The items were formulated in accordance with the objectives of intercultural education, as defined by the scholar Ioan Bontaș:

-acquiring information necessary for “knowing the diversity of cultural entities of various ethnic (national) entities”.

-“developing high intercultural beliefs, certainties and feelings” that lead to intercultural coexistence [2, p. 98].

-“developing skills, abilities and even habits to effectively coexist in the conditions of cultural interaction” in order to exclude discrimination, intolerance, hatred or even separatism under territorial relation [2, p. 98].

The process of designing the items in the ascertainment questionnaire was aligned with the vision of the scholar Sorin Cristea who believes that the research methodology specific to intercultural pedagogy is of an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary type “based on initiatives to <<pedagogize>> the social or on the transfer of some concepts from other social sciences (culture, contextualization, socialization, equalization, globalism, integration, migration, immigration, human rights, international cooperation, etc.)” [4, p. 54]. Therefore, the ascertainment questionnaire was designed in such a way as to evaluate the issue of training intercultural competence from a complex perspective.

The items were adapted from the intercultural competence assessment tool developed within the Pestalozzi Program [3, pp. 2-3] and from a manual on intercultural competence developed by the Council of Europe [5, pp. 34-35, 52-54].

The section related to students' knowledge includes items regarding: knowledge about interaction (items 1-7), knowledge about social practices (items 8-9), knowledge about the role of political and social actors -individuals or institutions- (items 10-12), but also knowledge about worldviews and belief systems (items 13-18).

The section on student skills includes items on: interaction (items 19-25), multiperspectivalism (items 26-32), critical thinking (items 33-36), problem solving and collaboration (items 37-43) and self-development skills (items 44-46).

The section on student attitudes includes items regarding: respect (items 47-53), tolerance of ambiguity (items 54-58), openness and curiosity (items 59-61), empathy (items 62-63), self-awareness (items 64-69), as well as the confidence to criticize opinions and accept criticism of one's own opinions (items 70-72).

The results of the pedagogical test applied to the experimental sample reveal that it is necessary to apply pedagogical interventions in the vast majority of the domains related to intercultural competence that were tested. During the training stage of the pedagogical experiment, students' knowledge must be improved in the following areas: knowledge about interaction, knowledge about social practices and knowledge about the role of political and social actors - individuals or institutions. It is necessary to develop students' skills regarding: multiperspectivalism, critical thinking, problem solving and collaboration, as well as the ability of self-development. It is necessary to form students' attitudes regarding the tolerance of ambiguity, empathy and the confidence to criticize opinions and to accept criticism of their own opinions. The need to insist on the development of critical thinking, tolerance of ambiguity and empathy is noted.

In order to carry out the formation stage of the pedagogical experiment, it is necessary to insist on the items for which the lowest percentages were recorded and for which, implicitly, immediate pedagogical intervention is necessary.

Students' critical thinking ability was assessed through the following four items:

1. I use all available information and my analytical skills to verify my interpretations.
2. I critically analyze the interpretations offered by others, including authoritative persons or sources.

3. I offer different ways of interpreting people's ideas and actions.
4. I provide clear arguments to explain my thoughts and choices.

The attitude regarding the ambiguity tolerance of the students in the experimental sample was tested through the following five items:

1. I feel comfortable in different cultural environments.
2. I am willing to put aside, temporarily, my values and norms.
3. I am patient when faced with unknown or uncertain situations.
4. I interact positively even if I don't know for sure what others are feeling or thinking.
5. I am aware of the fact that my way of thinking and acting is influenced by a set of values and norms.

The students' confidence to criticize opinions and to accept criticism of one's own opinions was tested through the following items:

1. I demonstrate that I am not afraid to disagree with others.
2. I suggest alternative ways of seeing and doing things.
3. I demonstrate that I accept that my ideas and opinions be criticized.

The analysis of the data obtained in the observation stage reveals the fact that it is necessary for the training experiment to aim at developing the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for the development of the intercultural competence of high school students from a complex perspective. The main points of the pedagogical intervention consist in the development of the following knowledge, skills and attitudes of students: flexibility, tolerance of ambiguity, self-reflection, open attitude, sensitivity, adaptability and lateral thinking.

During the formation stage of the pedagogical experiment, a wide range of educational activities was implemented in order to develop high school students' intercultural competence. Such an educational activity took place within the project "Knowing the (Roma)man next to you", a program financed by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through EEA Grants. The aim of the project is to increase the level of awareness on human rights and equal treatment, with a focus on the Roma minority. The educational activity aimed at developing the students' knowledge, skills and attitudes of flexibility, tolerance of ambiguity, self-reflection, open attitude, sensitivity, adaptability and lateral thinking. The activity was aimed at increasing the students' level of awareness regarding their rights as well as their ability to react to discrimination and hate speech in public space. For this project, a partnership agreement was concluded between the "Impreuna" Community Development Agency and the "Mihai Eminescu" College of Bacau. A student from the experimental sample carried out an activity in class on the subject of inclusion.

At the beginning of the activity, the student presented the activity profile of the "Impreuna" Agency. Then, she asked the students to write down on a piece of paper what their biggest fear is. Some students mentioned the fear of loneliness, the fear of failure, the fear of being abandoned by parents, the fear of being followed, the fear of being judged, the fear of not being understood etc. All these sheets of paper were collected in a hat.

Afterwards, the student invited her colleagues in front of the class. They drew tickets out of a hat and gave advice to those who had written down that fear. Optionally, the students who wrote that fear voluntarily raised their hand and acknowledged that fear as their own. This moment was deeply moving as the students gave moving testimonies inspired by their own lives.

In the next stage of the lesson, the student asked her colleagues to define the terms of stereotype, prejudice and discrimination. After this brainstorming exercise, the student presented the

definitions of these terms. At the students' request, she made a paper ball game that was passed around to the students. They mentioned a prejudice that other students had about them and that was not true. One of these prejudices referred precisely to belonging to the Roma ethnic group.

Next, the student presented and discussed the following educational videos:

https://www.tiktok.com/@norraromania/video/7207833515797351685?_r=1&_t=8aV10AxvVp7

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bb83Xuql5sw&t=24s>

https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=despre+masca+asta

These videos were followed by discussions about the effects of discrimination in general and on the Roma in particular. The lesson ended with the exhortation to be kinder to each other, not to judge anyone on the first impulse and to offer help and understanding.

In conclusion, the research demonstrates that the students' intercultural competence can be developed by improving their knowledge, skills and attitudes of flexibility, tolerance of ambiguity, self-reflection, open attitude, sensitivity, adaptability and lateral thinking. Educational activities such as the one presented above are useful tools to increase the students' awareness of the diversity of the community we live in, which reflects the diversity of the world that we live in. The intercultural competence proves to be increasingly necessary in a dynamic society, characterized by unpredictable developments and diversity, in continuous change and having multiple cultural inferences. Moreover, in the current context of globalization, the development of intercultural competence becomes an essential factor for success on the labor market.

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