

# SCHOOL CLIMATE AND INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** The present paper looks at the individual and contextual school related factors that have an influence on the level of tolerance toward ethnic minorities of the Romanian adolescents. The analysis is focusing on the data collected in Arad only, the discussion of the multilevel modelling is describing and bounding the characteristics of individual and school level that shape the level of tolerance of Romanian adolescents. Some of the hindering factors obstructing a true open and inclusive educational system in Romania are discussed. Based on these findings we formulate the implications for the educational policies aimed at increasing intercultural education in Romanian educational system.

**Key words:** school climate, tolerance, intolerance, intercultural education.

## **Intercultural attitude and tolerance**

Diversity is a fundamental aspect of all societies - it refers to differences that exist between people as individuals but also between different groups. Entering and experiencing intercultural interactions is inevitable. More, this kind of interaction can bring an added value to knowledge and cultural enrichments. Without mutual understanding, differences can generate conflicts that can degenerate into violations of human rights. Thus, intercultural education in particular and school, in

general is expected to have an important role in shaping the attitudes of students in order to correctly perceive diversity. “The group by the request that it states helps the adolescent to become conscious about his qualities and moreover to demonstrate them on the common activities. Thus the adolescent begin to define himself in terms of the features that he manifests in the relations with the other and to incorporate the status of member of certain social group in his selfdecribes” (Moldovan, Balas-Timar, 2008, p.64)

In its content, intercultural education refers to themes as “accepting and participation” and “learning to live together” and how to avoid “stereotypes and prejudices” Also, it seeks to propose solutions for promoting democratic values within the students. Due to the social importance of the abilities to coexist peacefully it is easy to see why intercultural attitude and intercultural education is an important theme, situated at the core of educational policies. Its importance is also reflected in the fact that several European institutions are promoting interculturality, for example, 2008 was the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue – “Together in diversity” in a joint action of the Council of Europe and European Commissions. Thus, research that come to describe the level of interculturality within a society, the facilitating and hindering factors as well as the specific actors that determine a particular situation are very important both for the policy agenda but also for the general public.

Our analyses come to add new evidence in this research field. The added value to the previous research consists in testing if school have a role in shaping the attitudes of students, thus promoting intercultural values. By doing this the intention is to contribute to better understanding the link between school contribution and individual characteristics in

shaping individuals attitudes. Not lastly, by disentangling the individual and school influences on students' attitudes, our analysis offers important evidence in support of effective educational policies promoting intercultural education. Self-knowledge is particularly important in educational and vocational guidance document, assuming self-identification of the following elements of personality: deciphering self-image, identify skills, abilities and skills, interests and motivation. (Costin, 2014, pp.76-82).

In this article we will focus on the role of formal education in shaping the attitudes of students. We ask if schools indeed do have an important role in shaping students attitudes toward other social groups or these attitudes are mainly explained by individual / personal characteristics. In order to answer this question we proceed by restricting the aspects of interculturality by focusing on a single dimension: tolerance or acceptance of the ethnic groups. Our choice is sustained by reports that suggest that in Europe for instance “resistance to multicultural society is shared by an over time rather stable minority of about a quarter of the Europeans, whereas more and more Europeans perceive that the limits to multicultural society have been reached” (Coenders, Lubbers and Scheepers, 2003).

### **Hypotheses**

Formal education is considered is one of the factors that contribute essentially to shaping one's attitudes (Kalmijn and Kraaykamp, 2007). In the case of teenagers this influence might be even more important since they are enrolled in some form of formal education. However, in the case of teenagers there are no results on how large this influence on their attitudes is. Thus our hypothesis is: do the variation of

students attitude toward ethnic groups is explained both by individual characteristics and school ones? If our first hypothesis is confirmed we argue that the difference between schools in shaping students attitudes resides in their capacity to transmit civic and democratic values. We base this argument on previous findings that show a positive relation between class climate and civic knowledge of students (attributes and result of the school environment and participation) to attitudes toward immigrants (Torney-Purta and Winkelfeld, 2008) Consequently we hypothesize that in schools that are perceived as transmitting more effectively democratic and citizenship values students will have significantly more tolerant attitudes toward ethnic groups.

Methods of study of society fall within the essential paradigm which seeks discovery or share power education personality development (Roman and Dughi, 2007, p.27) which transposes typically defining style and identity or which seeks genuine understanding rational aspects, however, and irrational (Vilfredo Pareto) of human actions.

### **Data and methods**

To test our hypotheses we use the data collected as part of the Civic Education Study of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) (Schulz and Sibberns 2004).

#### ***Dependent variable***

The dependent variable is the student attitude toward other ethnic groups. This concept was operationalized with a set of items that are summarised:

##### *Attitudes toward other ethnic groups*

- All ethnic groups should have equal chances to get a good education in this country.

- All ethnic groups should have equal chances to get good jobs in this country.
- Schools should teach students to respect members of all ethnic groups.
- Members of all ethnic groups should be encouraged to run in elections for political office.

The measurement scale for the items ranges from 1 to 4, where the 1 value means “strongly disagree” and 4 means “strongly agree”. The factor analysis we performed extracted one factor with eigenvalue higher than 1, and subsequent reliability analysis resulted in an Cronbach alpha of 0.626. Thus, we computed individual scores for each individual by averaging the scores for the four items, conditioning for at least three of them to have valid values.

***Independent variables – school level***

We hypothesized that the *values transmitted in school* will shape the attitudes of their students. We mainly referred to civic and democratic values that are a goal in itself of the educational process. These values were measured by a scale composed of the following items:

*In this section we would like to know what you have learned in school:*

- In school I have learned to understand people who have different ideas.
- In school I have learned to co-operate [work together] in groups with other students.
- In school I have learned to contribute to solving problems in the community [society].
- In school I have learned to be a patriotic and loyal [committed] citizen of my country.

- In school I have learned how to act to protect the environment.
- In school I have learned to be concerned about what happens in other countries.
- In school I have learned about the importance of voting in national and local elections.

Factor analysis performed on these items resulted in one factor extracted, and also the reliability test resulted in a value for Cronbach alpha of 0.772. In order to obtain the school values, we computed the individual scores by averaging the items values for individuals, and then we aggregated these values at each school values, using again the mean.

Our hypotheses imply that the variation in the students attitudes is explained both by individual and contextual factors. Thus, the appropriate method to analyze the data is hierarchical multilevel analysis, which takes into account the nested character of the data: students, who are at the first level of the analysis, are nested in schools, which constitute the second level.

## **Conclusions**

Our analyses have as the most important finding the fact that school is of major importance in shaping students tolerant attitudes. Our arguments in this sense are based on the calculation of the proportional error reduction at individual level and at school level. This measure is similar to R in linear regression - it expresses the proportional error reduction between a certain model and a null one. A higher value indicates that the model explains more of the variation of the independent variable. Our calculation shows that the proportional error reduction between model 5 and null model at individual level is only 6%. However the proportional error reduction at school level is of 30%. Thus we draw two conclusions: on one hand *at individual level there are other relevant*

*variables that can better explain the variation of students' attitudes toward ethnic groups, while at school level we have identified one of the most important characteristics.*

Another conclusion is that the most powerful effects on the variation of students' attitudes toward ethnic groups are *school characteristics and ethnicity*. The rest of the predictors have only moderate / low effects. A surprising result is that students that have parents with university education level prove to be more intolerant than the students with parents with no education. This effect was hypothesised to be in the opposite direction, and in accordance with a positive effect of educational aspirations of the students.

These main conclusions have an optimist message for the education policies. On one hand we showed that school can have a significant role in shaping the students tolerant attitudes. But, this capacity is dependent by school's capacity to promote values of citizenship and democracy. Thus, an important accent has to be placed on civic and intercultural education in the school environment. Another positive message that we derive is that when we encountered a negative effect encouraging intolerant attitudes and coming from parents' education level, the educational aspirations of the students can compensate and hinder this influence. Thus it is of equally importance for educational policies to promote educational aspirations, to encourage and sustain high educational attainment among the students.

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