

## **INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION, A KEY ISSUE IN THE INNOVATION OF THE INITIAL TRAINING OF THE FUTURE TEACHERS IN PRIMARY AND PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION.CASE STUDY**

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**Abstract:** *Significant changes in society in the late twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first led to increase and strengthen cross-border exchanges and multi- and intercultural human relations. With them, contacts between people belonging to different cultural areas have multiplied and intensified. Linguistically, culturally and axiologically heterogeneous institutions and companies have also diversified. In recent decades, it has become increasingly common to talk about intercultural communication, intercultural management, intercultural psychology and intercultural relations. Therefore a new formative vision for the growth of young generations and a new approach to learning and education has become a necessity, either taking into account the contemporary processes, or participating in facilitating these processes, a better understanding and a deeper respect between people, groups and /or human communities. This study seeks to capture the way future teachers in primary and pre-primary education, in their initial phase of training at UPG Ploiesti, understand the importance of intercultural education for their professional training, on the one hand, and to formulate proposals on the other hand.*

**Keywords:** *education, intercultural education, student, primary and pre-primary school teacher*

### **Introduction**

The world we live in is asking us to be open. Whether it is about business/trade, financial transactions, initiatives and political responses, cultural programs or creative-innovative approaches, the great majority are oriented toward openness. More than ever, "businesses operate on a worldwide basis. Their innovations unfold rapidly" (Hofstede, Hofstede, Minkov, 2012). Mergers take place and stock market fluctuates, which may at any time throw the business landscape out of balance (*idem*). Cross-border exchanges intensified and diversified.

At the same time, we are witnessing a dramatic process of expansion and dominance of technologies for information and online communication. For most of us (and growing day by day in numbers), the Internet has become the main go-to instrument to solve multiple problems of our daily life, both professionally and personally. The number of users grew exponentially (and will increase hereafter). It allows meeting and human interaction, no matter whose cultural area users belong to. Intercultural communication has become a necessity, and a common practice.

However, all this does not help intercultural understanding sort itself. On the contrary, it seems that it shapes the problem of "individual and group identity dynamics people enable and maintain" (Gavriliuc, 2006), as well as the deeper issue - of confronting values, of tensions between the various articulated structures/systems of values. G. Hofstede and collaborators (2012) believes that one needs an outstanding flair for survival - when life calls - in the different cultural and value contexts.

As a result, we understand that "in the conditions of a competitive and interconnected world" (Khan, 2013, p. 14), intercultural learning has become an overriding necessity. When, potentially, we are in danger, on the one hand, of having our cultural identity deleted, and, on the other hand, we witness conflicts out-breaking, misunderstandings, threats, marginalization, and axiological confrontation," our welfare - believes Ch. Leadbeater (2010) - depends less on what we possess and consume, and more on what we share and create together" (p. 28). In other words, our life depends very much on cooperation and mutual trust among people, no matter which culture they belong to.

In short, we live and shall live through times of intercultural awareness. Education is faced, therefore, with the reassessment of its fundamental grounds. Intercultural approach is a new way of designing and pursuing education.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of the present research was to disclose the meaning given to the intercultural dimension of contemporary education in the context of intensifying economic globalization and cross-border mobility by students in Pedagogy of Pre-primary and Primary Education, Faculty of Letters and Sciences of the Petroleum Gas University in Ploiesti, at the beginning of their initial training as teachers.

The method consisted in the implementation of a questionnaire (with pre-coded answers) on 56 subjects, of whom 15 were already teaching, and the rest (41) had no experience behind the desk.

**Table no. 1. The structure of the experimental sample**

Subjects	Number	Percentage
With seniority in education	15	27%
Without experience behind the desk	41	73%
<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>100%</b>

It reveals that more than a quarter of the subjects in the experimental sample work in education, they have daily direct contact with students. The trial has been conducted at the beginning of April 2015.

### Data and results

After the collection and processing of data, the following were revealed:

**Table no. 2. The opinion of subjects relating to the purpose of intercultural education\***

a.	b.	c.	d.	e.	f.	g.	Total
9%	7%	7%	16%	46%	2%	13%	<b>100%</b>

\* a. Knowledge of the most important cultures of humanity; b. Knowledge of world culture history; c. Discouraging potential conflicts between different human groups; d. Facilitate dialog between people; e. Knowledge of the habits, traditions, and rituals of different cultures; f. Deleting cultural identity of human groups; g. Shaping a global culture.

**Table no. 3. The opinion of subjects relating to the usefulness of intercultural education in inter-human relations\***

a.	b.	c.	d.	Total
14%	40%	34%	12%	<b>100%</b>

\* a. Know ourselves better; b. Know others better; c. Identify what we have in common with others; d. Identify what sets us apart from the rest of the people.

**Table no. 4. The vision of subjects relating to the importance of intercultural education in the development of one's own personality\***

a.	b.	c.	d.	e.	f.	g.	Total
20%	2%	3%	48%	7%	18%	2%	<b>100%</b>

\* a. Makes us more curious towards the ones from another culture; b. Determines us to be a bit more cautious in relation to those of another culture; c. Motivates us to express ourselves as we know better; d. Makes us open our hearts to the ones from another culture; e. Gives us more confidence in the one belonging to a culture other than ours. f. Determines us to be more firm in promoting and growing your own culture; g. Determines us to be more cautious in promoting and growing your own culture.

### **Comments and interpretations**

1. First of all, we were interested in finding out the opinion of respondents relating to *the central purpose of intercultural education*.

From the data collected, it appears that almost half of them (46 %) consider that *the purpose of intercultural education is to know habits, traditions, rituals, and fundamental values of the various cultures*. To them, this type of education is a favorable opportunity to become familiar with what is specific, original to each culture, no matter whether it is about the cultures on the African continent or Asian one, belonging to Australia or Oceania, North or South America, or anywhere in Europe.

Almost half of the subjects centered on what they might know about the roots and pillars of resistance - beyond the passage and erosion of time - of the various parts of the world (regardless of their geographical location or their influence on the course of history humanity).

Other options have obtained a relatively small percentage and have, from our point of view, a low significance. For instance, only 16% think intercultural education is a necessary tool for *facilitating dialog between people*. Therefore, such a dimension of education would, rather, play a part in knowledge and introduction to world cultures than a facilitating role in relations between people. It has to do, in particular, with our cultural equipment than with the creation of availability to more easily interact with other people belonging to other cultures.

Next, there comes the 13% of subjects which consider that intercultural education aims at shaping a global culture. Therefore, to this category of respondents, intercultural education is more directly linked to the trend of globalization, to the requirement to participate in a global culture of humanity, less (or increasingly less) differentiating. 9% believe, in their turn, that intercultural education has as its objective the knowledge of big cultures of humanity. They believe that we can talk about large and small cultures; that the latter could not constitute a point of much interest. We need to know about the world's major cultures, "exemplary" cultures, worthy to be followed and which influenced - in one way or another - the destiny of mankind. Of course, it would be interesting to reveal what would be the criterion according to which we could distinguish between the two categories of cultures, if indeed there is such a criterion.

In their turn, 7% of the respondents consider that intercultural education aims, by its objectives and approaches, *to discourage potential conflicts between various human groups*. We see, therefore, that this insignificant experimental segment (comprised of those at the beginning of their initial training) understands that it is important to have a tool, a cultural device through which we can act with a view to possibly defuse tensions between different groups of humans. These subjects have an inkling of the prophylactic,

beneficial purpose of intercultural education with respect to maintaining a peaceful state, to avoid confrontation on (inter)cultural grounds.

2. Regarding subjects' opinion on *the usefulness of intercultural education for inter-personal relations*, we can see that 40% of them believe that this (contemporary) type of education helps us *know others better*; other 34% consider that this helps us *identify what we have in common with others* (belonging to other groups); 14% believe that intercultural education helps us *know ourselves better*, and 12% *identify what sets us apart from the rest of the people*.

It shows that, for most of the people questioned, this dimension of education is useful in its approach to closely know others, our fellow human beings - as individuals and/or as a group - for the purpose of identifying *what we have in common*. This would mean that - for this experimental segment - *intercultural education is useful for bringing people together, for increasing inter-human confidence, for the deepening and stability of social relationships* (no matter the culture one or the other comes from). In this context, it is important to know each other's fundamental co-ordinates of the cultural background, at the time when we are in contact with our fellow human beings raised and educated in other systems of values and attitudes than ours. In such situations, we can only take care of the traditions, customs, (religious and social) rituals, and essential values of the other, but - at the same time - of the traditions, customs, (religious and social) rituals, and the essential values of our own culture.

Unfortunately, in a hegemonic world (from a military, economic, financial, and ideological point of view) it is extremely difficult to maintain such a beneficial, desirable, democratically, but fragile balance. Probably one of the most difficult practical assumptions of intercultural education is to preserve and assert, to the same extent, *the equal right of each culture to be itself, to coexist with all its history and identity* in a world which (tacitly - but also very persuasively) requires a single language of international circulation, a single economic model (claimed as the best), a centralized financial structure, institutions increasingly extended to world scale but designed in (coordinated from) a corner of the world or the trend of imposing a single ideology as fair.

*It is, maybe, the mission and the role of intercultural education to defend and support the right of each culture to express its system of values, behaviors and its creations, in an honest dialog, and mutual respect.* In this respect, the responsibility of those who formulate the objectives, principles, contents, and strategies of achieving this type of education is as important as it is high.

3. Even if most of the (investigated) subjects don't know and do not understand very clearly the role and place of intercultural education in their own (vocational) training and in the training of those with whom they are

working (or they will be working with), or what are the objectives and principles of this fascinating area of education, we tried, through our last item to inquire about *the vision of respondents relating to the changes that may occur in the evolution of their own personalities from its knowledge and assimilation.*

For instance, in table no. 4 it appears that:

- 48% (approximately half) consider that *intercultural education motivates us to open our hearts to the ones who come from another culture.* This category of students has an intuition that lifelong intercultural education leads us toward understanding each other, toward improving interpersonal communication, in general, and that with foreigners, in particular. It gets us out of our wariness, of the clumsiness of the uninitiated in another culture, it gives us confidence that we can build bridges with any individual, regardless of the culture they belong to. From the table, we see that *this option meets an obvious majority.* From this we can infer that most subjects are aware of the beneficial contribution of intercultural enhancement to the process of development and (self)actualization of their personality;
- 20% (one-fifth) consider that taking-up and deepening intercultural awareness *makes us more curious in connection with the way of being of the one originating in another culture.* They represent that category of subjects challenged by an interlocutor originating in another cultural area, and concerned to confront what they already know about their culture with what away they learn from him, in a interaction and/or common activity. In short, intercultural education has an obvious motivational component that sends students to unknown, but interesting areas of life, work, and creation;
- 18% of the respondents consider that *intercultural education determines us to be a bit more firm in promoting and growing our own culture.* It is about that category of subjects which give priority to their own culture, which believe intercultural awareness is first of all, to know who we are, to have a cultural identity formed by acquisition and internalization of values, practices and national/domestic creations. We can't go in an intercultural dialog, in an intercultural collaboration, if we do not have, at first, our own cultural profile. Everything that happens in the intercultural area starts from this requirement;
- other alternative answers have obtained a very small percentage, such as: 7 %, *intercultural education gives us more confidence in the one belonging to a culture other than ours.* 3 %, *intercultural education motivates us to express ourselves as we know better;* 2 %, *intercultural education determines us to be more cautious in relation to the ones coming from another culture;* 2 %, *intercultural education determines us to be more cautious in promoting and developing our own culture.*

As shown, intercultural education does not urge us, in the first place, to be cautious, or withdraw in relation to others. It does not push us toward suspicion (to foreigners), but neither toward distrust of our own culture.

### **Conclusions**

Humanity puts us in the face of such realities involving communication, inter-knowledge, respect, equality, freedom, cooperation, confidence. To achieve such goals, we have at hand some educational means, as well as intercultural education. This represents a training environment favorable to opening and closeness between people, be they more or less young. For those really interested in a better, more peaceful world, intercultural education becomes - or may become - a central objective of their life and a useful cultural tool.

The present study helped obtain a series of data and information welcomed to any specialist who is seriously and carefully concerned about intercultural education and to any of us who does not abandon this education in favor of a vague and superficial ideology. This data will drive us toward certain targets, will help us find appropriate training accents and not fail in a formal, improvised and derisory work. We believe that the investigation at hand constitutes a useful and welcome support with a view to the formulation of realistic objectives, principles, contents and strategies for achieving intercultural education for the would-be pre-primary and primary school teachers.

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