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The introduction of cultural education in initial and continuous teacher training programmes in Romania. Operational perspectives

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Abstract

The current article deals with the issue of intercultural education and teacher training programmes in Romania, which need to include intercultural elements into primary and secondary education. An incursion into the definitions and concepts of culture and interculturality is made to get a better insight into the background of intercultural education. The philosophy of designing teacher education programmes according to the principles and fundamentals of intercultural education is outlined. A possible syllabus contents, as well as training activities are suggested. In conclusion, there is a real need to introduce intercultural education courses within the pre-service and in-service teacher education curriculum.

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1. Introduction

Culture is a widely and easily debated concept, directly proportionally with the difficulty of finding a definition for it. The many attempts at defining the concept and the debates in the field of social sciences on the definitions of the term and of their implications in national ideologies and in the practice of public policies are well-known. For example, Kluckhohn & Kroeber (1952) recorded in 1952 no less than 161 definitions of the concept of culture. I will not outline here the whole history of the concept of culture because the first attempts to define it, essentialist, static

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and rigid, ended up in outmoded definitions for the current society, based on open contexts and variable geometry cultures (Nedelcu, 2008). The definition I prefer, derived from the current of cultural relativism, is at the same time the one that meets with the largest consensus in modern anthropology, culture is, in short, a set of behavioural abilities, notions and forms that individuals acquire as members of a certain culture. According to Geertz (1973, p.89), culture “denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life”. According to Lederach (1995), “Culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them” (p. 9).

As such, the concept of culture includes a profound ambiguity, in that, at the same time, it refers to a basic similarity between individuals (these being equally culture-bound), but also to the way in which difference between individuals is produced, culture itself being culture-generative. Thus defined, the concept of culture entails in fact the co-existence of a plurality of cultures and must therefore be understood from the perspective of relativism, as a cultural current. Cultural relativism reinforces the idea of equality between different cultures in terms of intrinsic value and discourages any attempt at proclaiming one culture as being superior or inferior to others. Values, norms, symbols of a culture must be evaluated within their context and functionality, and not by the criteria of a different culture. Within the given context, the coexistence of several cultures in the same area gave rise to a set of related concepts: multicultural, intercultural, as well as multiculturalism, interculturality.

2. Interculturality and multiculturality

Despite a superficial understanding that might consider the two terms as synonyms, the pair of concepts multicultural/ intercultural displays some important differences. Therefore, “multicultural” is a descriptive term, referring to a state of affairs, to several groups living together in the same society. The concept tends to outline the difference or even the clear distinction between cultures and groups being perceived as different and is used mainly in post colonial societies (Great Britain, the Low Countries), where very often, it refers to ethnic groups concurrently living together, without a real relationship between each other (Giordano, 2003).

On the contrary, the concept “intercultural” emphasises the interaction between groups perceived as distinct in a society, referring rather to a dynamic process of exchanges, of dialogue, of group negotiation, as well as the identification of a common language and of a common space in which communication takes place. The intercultural character of a fact is exactly the focus on mutual relationship between the constituent elements of exchanges. The acceptance of cultures’ diversity leads to the acceptance of the idea of coexistence of several cultures, to the adoption of multiculturalism, as a policy for diversity management. The term, equivalent to cultural, political, religious, etc. plurality, is predominant in the Anglo-Saxon countries, where the focus is on the recognition of the existence of several ethnic groups as national policy (Taylor, 1992). Beyond the political aspect of the recognition of the co-existence of several ethnic groups within the same state entity, multiculturalism only superficially touches upon the mode of interaction between these groups and upon the permeability between groups towards reciprocal influences.

The awareness of belonging to a certain culture involves, at least indirectly, referring to a different culture from which the individual separates themselves. From this perspective, there can only exist the intercultural awareness, that is, of the fact that a certain culture is perceived as being different from another. Thus, the concept of “interculturality” refers to the space between two groups conceived as belonging to different cultures. In this space intercultural education is born, a dialogue between subjectivities, a negotiation of identities, an interaction between individuals and groups perceived as being culturally different. (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1999). Through education, as an antidote against racism, xenophobia, exclusion and marginalisation, a new inter- and transcultural approach to this issue is pursued, as a result of globalisation.

A possible curriculum for intercultural teacher training needs to comprise topics, such as: Contemporary society trends; the multicultural-intercultural dynamics; The phenomenology of cultural transmission and diffusion; Cultural identity and differences. School consequences; Cultural relativism and pervert effects in education; Filtering social reality through images (categorisation, stereotypes, preconceived ideas); Discrimination; Intolerance; Xenophobia; Ethnocentrism; Racism; Sexism; Chauvinistic nationalism; anti-Semitism; Gerontophobia and juvenophobia; The

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