

THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL ONLINE PLATFORMS IN APPROACHING CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE EDUCATIONAL SPACE

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ABSTRACT. In Romania there is an expansion of the “cultural diversity” concept, as a social and reference value in the process of training and development of the humanistic conception regarding the world. The regional perspective of the cultural diversity concept provides examples and explanations of the mechanisms of particular hypostasis of difference associated with the “ethnicity” dimension, giving it a certain consistency and intensity of demonstrations. This is the approach chosen with the intention to analyze the “cultural diversity” reality from the perspective of students as present or future teachers, who identified a number of factors that determine the variation of events and the meanings of “local” influences in the affirmation of cultural diversity, at the level of educational space. Our study is a plea for the need of integration of demarches to promote cultural diversity through the informational platform among learners. Higher institutions must follow more and more an increase of institutional initiative in the cultural diversity management plan, but also in the training of students for a world of interculturalism, through ways of organizing studies and certification skills in ensuring the training equivalence at a national and international level.

Keywords: *cultural identity; equality of chances; cultural diversity; online educational platform; intercultural communication skills.*

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG. In Rumänien gibt es eine Erweiterung des Konzepts der “kulturellen VIELFALT”, verstanden als soziale und referenzielle Wert in dem Entstehung- und Entwicklungsprozess der humanistischen Vorstellung von der Welt. Die regionale Perspektive des Konzepts der kulturellen Vielfalt bietet Beispiele und Erklärungen von bestimmten Mechanismen der Differenz an, verbunden mit der “Ethnizität” Dimension, die ihm einen Konsistenz und Intensität in den Demonstrationen gibt. Das ist der gewählte Ansatz für die Analyse der Wirklichkeit der “kulturellen Vielfalt” von der Perspektive der Studenten, als aktuelle und zukünftige Lehrer, die eine Reihe von Faktoren identifiziert haben. Diese Faktoren bestimmen die Erscheinungsformen und

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Bedeutungen von den Einflüssen der "lokalen" in die Bestätigung der kulturellen Vielfalt in der Bildungsraum. Unsere Studie ist ein Plädoyer für die Notwendigkeit der Integration der Förderung der kulturellen Vielfalt durch Lernplattformen unter den Lernenden. Höhere Institutionen sollten immer mehr die Erhöhung der institutionellen Initiative im Kontext von kulturellem Vielfaltmanagement verfolgen, aber auch die Ausbildung von Lernenden für eine interkulturelle Welt, durch Organisationsformen für Ausbildung und Zertifizierung von Kompetenzen und die Gleichwertigkeit in nationale und internationale Ausbildung versichern.

Stichwörter: *kulturelle Identität, Chancengleichheit, Kulturelle Vielfalt, Online-Lernplattformen, interkulturelle Kommunikationsfähigkeit.*

I. Problem Statement

In a dynamic world, where we increasingly internalize the changes of socio-cultural and political-economic relations, society is constantly rebuilt and redesigned as a result of the competitiveness and free movement of the human capital, of goods or services. In this movement of economic, political, military or administrative territorial unity, globalization develops, extends and reforms even the mechanism of informational structures and processes. This also causes a tendency to perceive education at the same standards both globally and nationally, forcing school systems "to align to the same parameters or measurements" (Cucoş, C., Popa, N.L., 2009, pag.37). The process of global training of humanity is restructured based on the different socio-cognitive experiences of the existential realities of the cultural/ethnic communities but also on the new structures and forms of management of educational institutions. These must promote a multicultural curriculum based on community resources, on their learning experiences, but also on the promotion of values, attitudes and conduct that support cultural diversity and ethnic pluralism. Another objective of global education is the development of new technologies that have left their mark on educational theory and practice. These help to structure a program for the development of teaching skills, "to build a positive attitude with respect to integrating new technologies into teaching ... that enable teachers to understand the potential that the educational use of ICT has for the overall efficiency of teaching and learning activities" (Glava, C., 2009, pag.17).

In this context, the educational aims of the educational system in Romania include guidelines and tendencies of reformation existing on the axis of unification and globalization, targeting the training needs of the educational beneficiary, that develop into a postmodern socio-cultural reality, concerned with intercultural issues. However, "in a society where cultural diversity is still determined by differences in the social and professional status, where there are remnants of marginalization or exclusion from the social act, where teachers still struggle with their own prejudices" (Cuc, C.M., 2013, pag.220), education for diversity aims to

overcome the state of ethnocentrism. This objective can be achieved by building a common cultural spiritual space that valorizes the moral norms, civic skills, historical experiences of cultural/ ethnic groups, but also by facilitating the positive interactions between the educators and the educated, between the school and the local community. This desideratum finds its correlation in the pedagogical research undertaken, by valorizing online educational platforms where learners operate with existing representations in the virtual reality, in an adaptive electronic learning environment, "self-regulated according to the psycho-intellectual profile of the user" (Dulamă, E.M., 2010, pag. 151), in order to form skills necessary for effective intercultural and interpersonal interactions.

The educational policies in Romania are oriented towards promoting cultural diversity by adapting and innovating actionable strategies to the cultural characteristics that define the particularities of learning and training in the school community.

The motivation for proposing this research approach was based on the promotion of intercultural spiritual exchanges that favor a better understanding and cooperation at the level of cultural/ethnic groups, ensuring equal educational opportunities and social integration through educational activities. Therefore, through this study, we wanted to highlight the role of the educational platforms in popularizing the teachers' experience in conducting educational activities with children from different cultures, so that this experience can be capitalized by all teachers that work in multicultural environments.

II. Methods

As research methods we have used:

- direct observation of the conduct of educational activities applied in the various evaluations of teachers in pre-university education;
- questionnaire based survey, with items aiming to highlight the aspects of intercultural approach in the context of educational activities;
- experiencing learning using online platforms to facilitate the exchange of experience regarding the inclusion of intercultural content in the teaching and learning process;
- the focus group, in order to analyze the relevance and efficiency of the intervention via the online platform.

These methods were applied sequentially, according to the stages of the research conducted.

III. Participants

Our research focused on three groups of participants, some of whom were subjects of all three phases of the study: 1) a first batch (included in the research during the observational stage) - composed of 84 students of the Pedagogy of

Primary and Preschool Learning specialization, already working in the field of education, as teachers from preschool and primary education, working in both mainstream and special education. We selected the geographical areas affiliated to them, according to the known presence of certain nationalities and ethnic groups: Northern Bucovina, northern Maramures, the central area of Transylvania. Among the participants, 30 teach in mainstream preschool education, 38 teach in mainstream primary education and 16 teach in special education. In terms of seniority (assessed as the basis for a richer learning experience, including intercultural activities), the group composition was structured in the following way: 6 debuting teachers, with a seniority of less than 3 years, 11 with a seniority between 3 and 5 years, 27 with a seniority of 5-10 years, and 40 teachers with a seniority in education of more than 10 years. The main aspect we were interested in was that of nationality, respectively ethnicity of the children these teachers have worked or are working with, meaning that there is an opportunity to interfere more cultures in the educational context. Therefore, we found that 32 teachers mentioned working with children of Hungarian ethnicity, 24 mentioned children of German ethnicity, 18 - Children of Ukrainian ethnicity, 41 - Roma children. A total of 12 teachers mentioned other nationalities or ethnicities of the children they educate, such as Italian, Spanish or French. Please note that we specified for the questionnaire to also take into account children who were born in Romania but moved abroad with parents and returned to the Romanian educational system after a period of time during which they were included in educational programs in the countries they lived in, as well as children who were born in other countries, and then enrolled into our education system. We followed these aspects because the culture of certain countries where the children had the opportunity to live for a period of at least one year can leave its mark on their formation, 2) a second group of subjects (included in the formative research phase) - consisted of a total of 142 subjects, teachers from preschool and primary education, who took part in educational activities on the educational platform according to their desire for improvement, 3) the third group of participants, totaling 73 subjects, targeted members of three focus groups organized considering the geographical areas mentioned above who took part in all three phases of the study, through which they evaluated the results of the intervention carried out by using the educational platform.

IV. The Research Design

The research initially assumed establishing the purpose, hypothesis and research variables so as to follow a logical approach in obtaining relevant results.

4.1. Purpose, objectives, hypothesis and research variables

The purpose of the conducted research was to facilitate the exchange of experience among teachers regarding intercultural approaches in the context of educational activities.

The research objectives:

- observing the frequency, the type of activity, the way in which intercultural contents are included in the educational process and analyzing of these issues through the educational platform;
- using the online platform in order to inform teachers about the opportunities for implementing intercultural content in educational activities;
- developing the teachers' skills of capitalization in the educational context of cultural differences;
- posting concrete situational examples on the online platform that contribute to reducing discrimination and segregation between members of certain ethnic groups in schools and society;
- formation of the child's attitude to promote a tolerant behavior, acceptance and respect for the customs and traditions of other nations, their cultural and spiritual values, supporting personal development and their integration in society.

The research hypothesis was the following: development of experience exchanges mediated by educational online platforms means can lead strengthening and improving educational activities of training focused on multicultural and intercultural topics, helping to promote the acceptance and valuing of cultural differences within the group.

The independent variable: organizing a program of education and training through online education platforms focused on sharing experiences of teachers regarding the implementation of content specific to interculturality within formal, non-formal or informal activities.

Dependent variables:

- the degree of intensification of educational instruction and training activities focused on multicultural and intercultural topics;
- promoting acceptance and valorization of cultural differences in the school group.

4.2. Procedures

The research involved the delineation of three successive stages: 1) an ascertaining stage, which consisted of applying a questionnaire to 84 subjects whose data helped us establish the hypothesis and the elements of the intervention - conducted over a period of two weeks at the end of September 2013;

2) a second stage was to conduct the formative experiment in accordance with the purpose of research, this being carried out for over three months, until mid-January 2014. This involved requesting the teachers targeted for the study to register on the iTeach educational platform. We considered appropriate the use of this platform because it already possesses attractive training possibilities through the Intel Teach Advanced Online program and through programs developed by the Center for Innovation in Education (TEHNE Romania) or the Institute of

Education Sciences, these institutions being recognized by training programs provided in Romania. The platform integrates various web 2.0 tools and virtual facilities, providing an effective environment for facilitating the exchange of information. The teachers registered on this platform can be helped to develop distance education projects and professionally collaborate to improve the educational process, which helps us in achieving our research purpose. Therefore, teachers who have created an account on this platform at our request (as coordinators of the project) were encouraged to establish a professional group, who use the platform to facilitate the exchange of experience in the area of interculturality.

The coordinators asked on a regular basis for the posting of information materials, such as Power Point or Prezi presentations, photos, audio, video, bibliographic materials, etc. illustrating concrete ways to insert intercultural themed content into curricular or extra-curricular educational activities. The requested materials posted on the platform were divided into several categories, which helped teachers to better target their selection and elaboration of documents: a) information material regarding interculturalism, taken from various literature sources, 2) text or audio-video presentations of elements of culture and tradition specific to minorities in Romania, 3) photographs, films, recordings of intercultural themed lessons or extracurricular activities conducted with children, 4) intercultural educational projects carried out in partnership with various institutions, 5) suggestions, opinions, impressions, etc. relative to the intercultural experiences of the teachers. These materials intended to contribute to the enrichment of the amount of knowledge of the teachers with the main elements of the culture of other groups, the familiarity with the methods and techniques for implementing intercultural content, the formation of attitudes necessary for carrying out activities in the educational profession in terms of working with children belonging to various ethnic groups, but also the opportunity to optimally valorize the cultural values of the educated students.

The coordinators constantly monitored the group activity on the platform during the program implementation, initiating discussions, interventions, observations, etc., so that all the information posted to be helpful to those registered in the group. At the same time, short reviews of interventions on the platform were conducted so as to facilitate the selection and the option for a certain type of information that each teacher may apply into practice, in accordance with the particularities of the facing educational group.

3) a third stage (carried out in late January and early February 2014) involved the analysis and capitalization of the achieved results, as well as establishing new courses of action. This stage aimed at emphasizing, through the focus group, the relevance of interventions on the educational platform. The topics for discussion and analysis were centered on both the basis on which the questionnaire was developed, but also on some new issues related to the effectiveness of the e-learning activities undertaken.

V. Results

The data observed following the administration of the questionnaires showed that 28% of the teachers felt that the main reasons behind the use of educational content addressing intercultural issues relate to the fact that they are mandatory, as stipulated by the school and curricular documents. Thus, we took into account the responses of teachers who specified that they personally develop various disciplines focused on intercultural approaches within the school curriculum, at the school's decision.

A percentage of 53% of respondents admitted that they would rather use intercultural topics in situations created by ordinary contexts of life, saying that they needed to broaden the cultural horizons of children. Also, in this case there were also taken into account the mentions of people interviewed concerning the organization of some extra-curricular educational activities, which are based on various elements of the culture of children but also on activities undertaken with their parents, including the capitalization of their cultural experience.

Approximately 19% of those surveyed admitted they do not address intercultural issues in educational activities.

We have also requested the respondents for a critical analysis of curriculum materials, textbooks or educational auxiliaries used in kindergarten and primary school, regarding the volume of intercultural contents contained in the specific topics. Thus, 26% of the teachers surveyed felt that the curricular material that guides their work contains enough content that can valorize the multicultural and intercultural dimension.

Meanwhile, 32% said that the curricular materials meet intercultural approaches only to a moderate extent and 42% felt that these materials are appropriate only to a small extent to facilitate the introduction of elements of interculturality in educational activities.

Because treating certain topics of multicultural and intercultural content requires certain experience and even expertise of the teaching staff, we wanted to know if there is a need among educators for the implementation of training programs aimed at intercultural component. We identified, based on the responses from the questionnaire, the fact that 29% of teachers believe that intercultural approaches are greatly needed but training courses are not required for this. However, 68% of teachers consider that intercultural approaches are necessary and require training courses for this, while only 3% believe that intercultural topics and activities are needed, but to a lesser extent and do not require training courses. Very important is the fact that more than half of the respondents admitted that they had experienced difficulties over time in educational work with children of different ethnic groups, as they noticed the emphasizing of a certain (mutual) inability to understand and even tolerate some manifestations specific to the other's culture.

One of the questionnaire items involved providing examples of learning situations where teachers have valorized the cultural experience of the ethnic groups that they interacted with in the educational process. It was surprising that the majority of respondents (82%) provided examples from the field of extracurricular activities, less frequent in education, and 4% did not provide any examples.

Another item requested arguments in favor of using intercultural themes in educational activities, and their synthesis has given us the opportunity to register, in the first place, the avoidance of conflicts between students (mentioned by 73% of teachers), in the second place - equipping students with skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for proper social integration (with 65% mentions), in the third place - familiarization of ethnic groups with the principal elements of the culture of other groups, understanding and respecting them (48% mentions), in the fourth place - avoiding the phenomena of intolerance by accepting cultural differences within the group (36% responses), in the fifth place - outlining certain elements of general culture by knowing the customs and traditions of other peoples, and the cultural and spiritual values of others (23% responses). There were other arguments, but they were highlighted to a lesser extent, and we will not expose them in this context.

In planning and organizing the formative program, represented by elements of information and formation performed through the educational platform, we have taken into account the opinions and attitudes recorded using the questionnaire, trying to approach topics of discussion and elaboration of materials to support the need for intercultural education and to provide practical implementation models.

After the completion of activities on the online platform, through focus groups held with teachers who have participated in the program, we noticed that illustrative posts of sequences of activities that took into account intercultural content, both in the context of formal and non-formal activities, have been especially appreciated (by 75% of participants). At the same time, it emphasized the fact that you can successfully adapt educational interventions for specific minorities in addressing children belonging to other minorities (aspect pointed out by 60% of the respondents). A remarkable appreciation was also noted regarding the transfer of experience of teachers who have worked/are working with Romanian children that have lived and were included in the educational system of other countries for at least 1 year (about 40%).

The table below provides some relevant comparative results, expressed as percentages, between the opinions of teachers surveyed in the initial research stage and in its final stage:

Table 1.

The opinions expressed by the teachers surveyed in the debut of the research stage as well as its final stage

Items	Initial stage	Final stage
Using intercultural themes in addressing mandatory content	28%	45%
Using intercultural themes in optional activities and in situations created by the ordinary contexts of life	53%	80%
Valorisation of the cultural experience of ethnic groups that the teachers have interacted with in formal learning situations	14%	25%
Valorisation of the cultural experience of ethnic groups that the teachers have interacted with in situations of non-formal education	82%	85%
Appreciation of the contents of educational materials and auxiliaries used in order to address intercultural topics	26%	30%
The need for training programs in order to deal with intercultural approach	68%	90%
The presence of difficulties in educational work with children of different ethnicities	64%	45%

Analysis of comparative data between the two stages of the research reveals that there are some differences that highlight the efficiency of the activities carried out on the on-line platform, even if the available time was short. Nevertheless, difficulties remain present in addressing students of different ethnic groups, which would justify a continuation of the intercultural themed training activities.

Discussions with participants in the focus groups have also led to the identification of suggestions determined by the needs of teachers to experience the implementation of intercultural content in the educational practice more thoroughly. Of these, the most frequently mentioned were the following: training courses regarding the multicultural and intercultural component, education partnerships between kindergartens and schools with children of different ethnicities, communication sessions, organization of workshops, debates within the department and pedagogical commissions, experience exchanges, including the continuation of activities initiated on the educational platform.

VI. Conclusions

This study confirms the fact that there are concerns among teachers regarding e-Learning and its formative resources, that meet the educational needs and interests that traditional programs can not face anymore. The use of informational means supported the familiarization of teachers with strategies of

pluralistic treatment of cultural diversity through knowledge and appreciation of the cultural heritage that students bring with them to school. Meanwhile, online educational platforms favored the exchange of teaching expertise, but also the connection of the virtual environment to everyday reality by exceeding the limits of action and interrelation, regardless of their cultural or ethnic origins, since “digital knowledge will innovate much data of traditional knowledge, by placing the sum of values that humanity has advanced over time” (Marinescu, M., 2013, pag. 69).

In this globalization perspective, where the most significant benchmark in building identity is culture, the main objective of institutions of superior education should aim at increasing the institutional initiative in the plane of efficient management of cultural diversity, and the training of young people for a world of intercultural, through ways of organizing studies and certifying competences to ensure the equivalence of training.

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