Curricular premises and strategies in order to develop students' intercultural competences

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Abstract

The relationship between cultural diversity's factors and the development of some structures belonging to students' personality, represents a basic premise in studying intercultural education. One theme of this issue is related to curricular strategies focused on training situations, which enable students' intercultural learning experiences and social performances awareness, as part of the multicultural society. The article Curricular premises and strategies in order to develop students' intercultural competences develops the following coordinates: 1) theoretical foundation of the development process of students' intercultural competences, as part of the school curriculum; 2) results of some previous personal researches in intercultural education, relevant with regard to the theme; 3) suggesting a suite of curricular strategies, which facilitate intercultural learning and structuring of specific competences; 4) the process and results of an empirical research study, which reveal subjects' expectances and opinions (didactic staff, specialists in intercultural education, students attending Social Sciences) regarding the curricular development, from the perspective of intercultural education methodology.

Keywords: intercultural education, intercultural competences, intercultural learning; intercultural curriculum; curricular strategies.

1   Introduction

The intercultural perspective provides a new vision upon the culture concept, for the purpose of approaching its dynamic dimension, by emphasizing not only the thesaurus of material and spiritual products (historically and descriptively speaking), but also the processes the subjects and social groups are involved in. Taking into consideration the dynamic aspect of the relational coordinate, culture "is represented by values in flux, by traditions, social and political relations built everywhere, belonging to a group of persons brought together by a combination of factors including common history, geographical position, social class or religion, as well as the modalities in which they are transformed by those who share them" (Nieto, 1992, p. 138).

As far as education is concerned, the intercultural paradigm implies a comprehensive approach of the trends specific to philosophy, sociology and cultural anthropology correlated with educational principles, policies and methodologies, in order to promote and instill the values of inter-subjective relations as part of the multicultural areas. In a broad sense, the intercultural education represents „a dialectics project meant to structure an open cultural identity, having the purpose of: guiding youngsters in order to assimilate a culture of anthropological perspective; understanding other's point of view, through relativistic intelligent placement; legitimating cultural identity, by discouraging the beatification; ensuring the respect of differences, but as part of some systems of mutual attitudes" (Cucoș, 2000, 173-174). Regarding the perspective of the intercultural education's terminology principles, we stick to Rey' point of view, based on intercultural education's strategic approach, which facilitates (Rey, 1991, apud Dasen, Perregaux, Rey, 1999, 154):

- overtaking ethnocentric prejudices and stereotypes;

- increasing chances of social assertion for underestimated individuals and groups, in order to manifest their cultural references and develop their social competences;

- acknowledging the relations settled between cultures, social categories, school institutions, educational disciplines, as well as between individuals, regardless of their ethnicity, language, culture, age;

- intercultural learning and communication of the abilities in order to negotiate cultural diversity's norms and values;

- assessing each individual's social attributions, as far as the local context,

national and international community are regarded.

The mission of the intercultural school is based on two categories of general purposes (Cucoş, Cozma, 2001, 46-47): a) preserving and capitalizing the school population's cultural diversity, through strategies that facilitate students' adjustment to cultural aspects of their area, by developing behaviors and attitudes in order to capitalize the cultural identity of understanding, respecting and socializing in groups having diverse cultural backgrounds; b) preserving school's unity character, by capitalizing the specific characteristics of surrounding cultures and facilitating culture's comprehension from a dynamic perspective, of permanent construction.

As far as the European Council is regarded, the intercultural education's desideratum aims two dimensions, as part of formal and non-formal contexts: a) asserting the cultural diversity, as part of the European multiculturalism; b) developing the intercultural competences, as part of the permanent education process.

Understanding the approaches in analyzing intercultural competences implies multiple conceptual perspectives to take into consideration. Thus, the conceptual evolutions are progressively influenced by the following perspectives:

1. *Approaches based on the intercultural communication component, as the intercultural competence's core*. The efficiency of the intercultural networking and communication is provided by a series of linguistic capacities and abilities, which imply cognitive, affective, motivational, attitudinal and behavioral processes. To this effect, the intercultural competence represents "individuals' capacity in order to efficiently communicate with interlocutors of different cultures, based on abilities of social networking, comprehension and adjustment to different cultural environments" (Georgiu, 2010, 125).

2. *Argumentative speeches of the pedagogy centered on competences.* The competences paradigm has determined, as far as the intercultural education subject is regarded, a complex and contextualized analysis of the intercultural learning results, which determines the educational vision, curricular planning models and strategies in order to deploy curricular projects. Thus, the intercultural competence represents an operational and transferable ensemble of knowledge, abilities, attitudes and skills desirable to some cognitive, affective and active processes as part of multicultural contexts: understanding cultural alteration, empathy, adjustment of behaviour,

communication, interaction, socialization, acculturation, cultural integration.

3. *Implications of the situational approaches as part of the intercultural pedagogy.* From a situational perspective, the transverse intercultural competences are structured and manifest themselves in accordance with the model of the tridimensional logic (Jonnaert, Ettayebi, Defise, 2010, 83). To this effect, the intercultural competences are being approached through: action logic as part of adjustment, absorption and socialization situations; curricular logic, regarding curriculum's re-dimension and development (school programs, textbooks, auxiliaries, contents, training methodologies), in the spirit of the intercultural principles and in order to accomplish the synchronism between cultural identity and values of the co-existence as part of the multicultural society; cultural and intercultural learning logic, by capitalizing interacting models and having as backing students' results (intercultural learning experiences, social performances).

The intercultural competences are defined by relating the characteristics of the multicultural context with those of the intern factors, which are involved in emphasizing social performances. Given this premise, the intern resources activated in developing and asserting intercultural competences are: "a) attitudes: esteem and recognition, spiritual opening, non-evaluative attitude, respect, anxiety control, science knowledge curiosity; b) knowledge: proper cultural and intercultural awareness, knowing the plurality of interpretations, positive expectations, linguistic and cultural codes, self-consciousness of analogies and distinctions in relation to others; c) abilities in order to: create new categories, empathize, tolerate uncertainty, adjust communication, efficiently identifying and utilizing information, adjusting behavior, utilizing diverse codes, managing interaction" (Butnaru, 2001, 97).

The development strategies of students' intercultural competences are derived from the curricular framework of the educational policy, in order to promote intercultural values and it aims multiple sub-domains:

- curricular planning, in the spirit of the model based on competences and of the constructivist ones;

- training strategies specific to intercultural education, as part of the postmodernism context;

- evaluation strategies of students' social performances, by reference to criteria and modalities of holistic evaluation, relevant for transverse competences;

- managerial strategies in order to optimize and develop the curriculum, as far as the institution and students care regarded.

As part of the activities that promote intercultural education's values, application of the curricular planning model based on competences facilitating curricular projects' development, focuses on networking and involving all training variables with the aim of structuring the intercultural competences' component elements. To this effect, while planning and programming activities, didactic staff deploys multiple decisional stages, given the forecast of the intercultural learning's final results (adaptation after Killen, 1999):

- decisions regarding the social performances students have to prove, by selecting those relevant from a set of diverse behaviors, as part of the cultural diversity context;

- decisions regarding the selection of contents relevant in order to facilitate intercultural learning experiences and adequate teaching strategies;

- decisions regarding modalities and tools of evaluating the aimed intercultural competences.

The constructive model planning has a few distinctive characteristics of the methodological stages, which are relevant for the training as part of intercultural education, too (Richey, 1995, apud Joița, 2006):

- analyzing students' needs of knowledge and tasks accomplishment, which determines the curricular context of learning;

- mentioning, together with the students, the specific purposes, in order to motivate and involve them in capitalizing personal experiences and abilities, necessary for the accomplishment of new assignments;

- describing organizational and coordinating strategies in order to implement the curricular project, the modalities of guiding and motivating students, by manifesting teacher's role, of assistance, tutoring and counseling;

- specifying evaluation procedures and tools, related to the progress accomplished from one stage to another, to the self-evaluative capacities;

- rebuilding the actual curriculum as part of the students class, from the perspective of personalizing the knowledge building.

The training and evaluation strategies, utilized as part of the intercultural education, aim multiple dimensions:

a) expressing cultural identity;

b) knowing, understanding and capitalizing cultural diversity, as an optimal environment in order to develop personality's social dimension;

c) intercultural communication;

d) work capacities and abilities as part of multicultural groups;

e) abilities in order to establish some accurate relations as part of the students community, having diverse cultural backgrounds;

f) participating in extra-school activities and projects, as part of intercultural environments;

g) meta-cognitive capacities and abilities, regarding the intercultural competences' self-evaluation and the deployment of personal development projects, as part of multicultural contexts.

2 Methodology

2.1. Objective

The purpose of the empiric research aims systematizing relevant data in order to support the research project *Directions of developing the intercultural curriculum, from the perspective of the European educational dimension,* financed by the Romanian Academy, as part of the POSDRU project 159/1.5/S/136077 "Romanian culture and European cultural models: research, synchronism, durability".

To this effect, the study belongs to methodological micro-researches cathegory, based on defining the theoretical premises and on developing tools in order to implement the above mentioned research project.

The purposes of the investigation are:

1. Determining the curricular strategies in order to develop students' intercultural competences, having a higher impact as part of multicultural educational environments, by reference to subjects' perceptions and opinions.

2. Developing some strategic directions in order to develop intercultural competences, given the micro-research's results, correlated with other personal researches in the field.

2.2. Participants

The subjects have been selected by means of the mixed sampling technique and present characteristics that are similar to the sample of subjects that will be involved as part of the *Directions of developing the intercultural curriculum, from the perspective of the European educational dimension.* The sample's structure and

subjects' distribution on categories and professional environments has the following composition: 50 didactic staff teaching as part of the pre-University education, in Oltenia's South-West; 25 specialists in intercultural education (University didactic staff, having studies and experience in the socio-human field and related researches); 40 students attending educational and social sciences faculties, also attending the psycho-pedagogic training program.

2.3. Instrument

The main tool of the empiric research is the questionnaire, applied to each of the three subjects categories. The questionnaire includes 24 items, distributed on curricular strategies' sub-domains: a) modalities in order to plan the curricular strategies, based on intercultural education subjects (items 3-7); b) efficient training strategies as part of the intercultural curriculum (items 8-13); c) evaluation strategies, moalities and tools, relevant in order to assess intercultural competences' development level (items 14-18); d) strategies and procedures specific to the educational management, aiming the psycho-social dimension of the students class (items 19-24).

2.4. Instrument

The questionnaire has been directly and face-to-face applied to students, as part of some applicative activities, and as far as the didactic staff is regarded, there have been conducted some actions to this effect. In order to achieve detailed answers, we have conducted and coordinated two focus-groups meetings, on the same topic, with subjects belonging to each of the three sampling categories.

2.5. Data analysis

Data analysis has been accomplished within the meaning of ensuring answers' relevancy and merging the quantitative and qualitative methodology as part of the educational research:

a) systematizing quantitative data and distributing it on criteria that makes operational research's specific purposes, specified as curricular strategies' sub-domains; b) answers' quantitative and qualitative analysis that positively assess the variables indicated (by bringing together those on „to a large extent" and „to a larger extent" scales or the values 4, 5); c) synthesizing the consistent and relevant answers, recorded with regard to open and detailed items as part of the focus-

groups items.

The data achieved and its significance have been related with the results of a previous personal research in the field regarding: a) perceptions with regard to the Romanian intercultural curriculum, from the perspective of relevancy for the intercultural education's values as part of Europe; b) development directions of the intercultural curriculum; c) optimizing the planning and implementation of intercultural educational programs; d) teachers' training in European curriculum's methodology. In general, the results of these researches confirm the consistency of the curriculum issue from a theoretical and methodological point of view, but also the necessity in order to re-dimension the Romanian intercultural curriculum and to train teachers in the field of intercultural education.

3   Results

Analyzing the quantitative data reveals the following results, grouped on categories of curricular strategies in order to develop students' intercultural competences:

a) *Models and methodologies of the curricular planning*:

1) the curricular planning model based on competences, defined in the spirit of curriculum's comprehensive approach (Potolea, 2002); to this effect, the relation between curricular variables is regulated by educational finalities, defined within the meaning of capacities, knowledge, abilities and attitudes that can be transformed into cognitive and social performances, as part of the cultural diversity context (Ciolan, 2002, Cristea, 2002, Jonnaert, P., Ettayebi, M., Defise, R. 2010, EACEA/Eurydice, 2012);

2) the curriculum planning model approached from a constructivist point of view, which details the curricular model based on competences and on the purposes of the cognitive and constructivist training, as premises in order to assert competences of comprehension, of interpreting cultural alteration and building adequate intercultural relations (Bunăiaşu, 2011, Joiţa, 2006, Wilson, Lowry, M., 2000);

3) situational models of curriculum conception, which, by adjustement and development, are adequate in order to develop transverse competences, assessed as part of educational situations in multicultural contexts (Goodlad, Skilbeck, apud Bunăiaşu, 2011);

4) planning methods, which facilitate tools' development and optimization

of the curricular projects' implementation: task and context analysis; comparison method; up-scaling; utilizing the multimedia systems (Joița, 2006, Jonassen, 1999).

Table 1. Quantitative data regarding the variable models and methodologies of the curricular planning

Groups	Criterion no. 1	Criterion no. 2	Criterion no. 3	Criterion no. 4.
Pre-University didactic staff	68%	46%	48%	42%
Experts	80%	64%	68%	64%
Students	72,50%	57,50%	62,50%	65%

b) *Training strategies specific to intercultural education*:
1) capitalizing the characteristics of multiple training strategies, which are flexibile when it comes to intercultural learning situations and which facilitate asserting empatethic capacities and creativity (Cerghit, 2002, Iucu, 2001, Mikolajczak, M., Quoidbach, J., Kotsou, I. , Nelis, D., 2014): 1.1. affective and motivational strategies; 1.2. analog strategies, by utilizing models of cohabitation and networking in multicultural contexts; 1.3. heuristic and creative strategies students utilize in order to solve problematic situations and to learn by descovering and capitalizing elements of their own culture or of the cultural alteration;
2) group communication methods and techniques, which facilitate interaction relations as part of the students class, developing multicultural group's creativity: 2.1. methods and techniques of interactive teaching-learning; 2.2. methods in order to cultivate creativity and solving problems; 2.3. methods based on group debate (Pânişoară, 2003, 2006, Oprea, 2008); 2.4. "practical communication intervention which includes communication practical knowledge, meaning communicative know-how" (Smarandache, Vlăduțescu, 2014) and "actions in information processing" (Vlăduțescu, Smarandache,

2014).

3) methods and techniques of constructive training, based on developing capacities in order to process information, to develop abilities of building knowledge and understand alteration and intercultural relations (Joiţa, 2006): methods in order to configure mental image, methods in order to accomplish comprehension, methods in order to organize cognitive experience, methods in order to constructively solve problems, methods in order to make decisions;

Table 2. Percentage data regarding the variable training strategies specific to intercultural education

Groups	Criterion no. 1.1	Criterionno. 1.2.	Criterion no. 1.3.	Criterion no. 2.1	Criterion no. 2.2	Criterion no. 2.3.	Criterion no. 2.4.	Criterion no. 3
Pre-University didactic staff	68%	66%	78%	68%	82%	84%	62%	48%
Experts	72%	64%	84%	80%	76%	72%	80%	72%
Students	72,50%	67,50%	75%	67,50%	77,50%	75%	65%	57,50%

c) *Evaluation strategies, relevant in order to assess intercultural competences:*

1) capitalizing the training evaluation paradigm, based on utilizing meta-cognitive strategies as part of the evaluation process (Potolea, Manolescu, 2005, 6);

2) utilizing to a larger extent the criteria of global evaluation and the alternative evaluation methods, relevant in order to assess the development level of the intercultural competences;

3) utilizing the work portfolio as part of the multicultural group, as a

complex method of intercultural learning, self-evaluation, inter-evaluation and holistic assessment of students cognition and social performances.

Table 3. Quantitative data referring to the variable evaluation strategies, relevant in order to assess intercultural competences

Groups	Criterion no. 1	Criterion no. 2	Criterion no. 3
Pre-University didactic staff	52%	84%	78%
Experts	76%	80%	88%
Students	57,50%	77,50%	72,50%

d) Strategies specific to institutional management and students class:

1) introducing intercultural education programs as part of school institutions' curricular offer;

2) managerial strategies that aim the psycho-social dimension of the students class, which can be operational while interacting, communicating and managing educational crisis situations (Iucu, 2008, Level, Galle, 1988);

3) adequate and flexible application of teacher's managerial roles, in order to plan, organize, coordinate, guide, evaluate and advise students (Iucu, 2008, Joița, 2000).

Table 4. Percentage data regarding the variable strategies specific to institutional management and students class

Groups	Criterion no. 1	Criterion no. 2	Criterion no. 3
Pre-University didactic staff	84%	65%	56%
Experts	88%	72%	68%
Students	72,50%	77,50%	62,50%

4   Discussions

The quantitative analysis of the answers reveals significant differences between the categories of subjects as far as some variables are regarded, whom experts have capitalized to a larger extent: situational models and methods of planning the curriculum, methods and techniques of the constructive training, training evaluation paradigm. Despite these differences, which can be explained through the expertise degree as part of the intercultural education, we assess subjects' adhesion to postmodern pedagogy strategies, which are applied as part of the intercultural curriculum. Given the detailed answers as part of the focus-groups and individual interviews, we have ascertained didactic staff's experience in applying interactive strategies, but also the awareness in methodic improvement in the field of planning and evaluating the curriculum based on competences, especially the transverse competences cathegory.

The results recorded confirm the basic supposition of the empiric micro-research, according to which knowing and assessing intercultural education's values, along with opinions and methodological experiences in the field of the curriculum focused on student, facilitates developing curricular strategies and tools in order to train students' intercultural competences.

The results of the micro-research will be capitalized on two coordinates: the one of the research's methodology and the coordinate of students' intercultural education process. As far as the methodological research is regarded, we have decided some of the questionnaire's items to be integrated as part of the questionnaire applied to didactic staff and experts belonging to the target group of the research project din grupul-țintă al proiectului de cercetare *Directions of developing the intercultural curriculum, from the perspective of the European educational dimension.*

By cummulating and correlating relevant answers with results of personal documentary and empiric researches in the field, we have achieved a useful data base that will be capitalized in implementing the research project. Thus, the variables regarding the curricular planning model, training, evaluation and managerial strategies will be adjusted and diversified with methodological elements relevant for the development process of the intercultural competences and for the assessment of students' social performances, belonging to the target group of the above mentioned research project.

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